

THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY RUDE, STIRLING

'There were four great medieval burghal churches in Scotland. St. Giles' at Edinburgh, St. John's in Perth, St. Michael's of Linlithgow, and the Church of the Holy Rude which assured Stirling of the greatest of them all. There was nothing like it anywhere else in all Europe, it was a glory of Scotland, a masterpiece.' Thus said none other than Dr. Douglas Simpson, perhaps the foremost authority on such matters.

As we look up the long vista of Spittal Street we see towering at the top the magnificent eastern front, particularly beautiful if lit by the morning sun, and which, no doubt, was in the mind of Sir Robert Lorimer when he designed the National Shrine at Edinburgh Castle. We notice the tall four-light windows, the buttresses with numerous sloped intakes and richly carved niches which once contained statuettes. Incidentally, no structural damage was done to this church at the time of the Reformation. The east end, built between 1529 and 1555, was the work of a man of genius, John Coutts, who instead of making a monotonous roof-line all at the same level, gave us an interesting, exciting roof-line of different heights and of fine proportions, with the majestic buttresses soaring to the level of the topmost wall. This is the first sight most people have of the church, and a most inspiring one it is, too.

By contrast, at the west end, we have something else that is unique: the tower, of splendid proportions, from whatever angle we look at it. Freedom of style enhances its commanding appearance because, the church being built on a natural slope, the tower has this elevated presence. It is 85 feet in height from the base to the top of the parapet, and 15 feet more to the top of the stone work of the turret spire, making it 100 feet in all. For three-quarters of its height, it is oblong, and then becomes a square. The great west window was lengthened to its present dimensions in 1818, having been previously the old western doorway into the church. It had obviously been the intention of the builders to erect a central tower, for in the crossing stand four immense pillars mounted on massive bases, each measuring 8 feet square, which is the same size as those which support Glasgow Cathedral's 200-foot tower.

In 1129, King David I granted by charter to Dunfermline Abbey two churches in Stirling, one of which was the Church of the Holy Rude. (Rude or Rood being an old English word meaning the Cross of the Crucifixion.) But in 1406 a disastrous fire swept over the town, completely destroying the church. However, in 1414, the

Chamberlain's accounts contain a grant to the 'work of the burned Parish Church at Stirling', and so to that approximate date we may ascribe the building, probably by foreign masons employed by the monks, of the tower, nave and south aisle.

The splendidly proportioned nave consists of 5 bays, spanned by an original open-timbered oak roof, and on either side there are vaulted aisles. At the west end the rounded pillars with their Scottish shafts and Gothic arches and occasional mason's marks give way to two clustered ones between which the Rude screen was placed. Why are there clerestory windows only on the south side? No satisfactory answer to that question has been forthcoming. The general effect of the nave is massive and dignified.

But the church was not big enough, and in 1507 an agreement was entered into between the Abbot of Dunfermline and the Town Council of Stirling by which the Council undertook to build 'ane gud and sufficient queyr conformand to the body of the peroch kirk'. And as a result of this we have the totally different Gothic Perpendicular style of the choir. In complete contrast to the impressive simplicity of the nave, we have an ornate grandeur and richness of detail. The pillars are tall and formed of clustered shafts round a central pier, the arches lofty and the windows large, while the ceilings of the north and south aisles are beautifully groined. But, the spaces between the pillars are not alike, the windows are not exactly opposite each other, nor of the same width. The terminations in the south aisle are carved with heads, some of them grotesque, while those on the north side are plain, but yet these very irregularities seem somehow to add to the beauty and interest of the choir.

There have always been three elements in the communal life of a medieval burgh: the castle, the Kirk and the market-place, and Stirling was no exception. As a rule the market-place was polarized on the castle, as it was here in Stirling until the building of Mar's Ludging. Usually the church stood a little aloof, for peace and quiet, away from the bad language and boisterousness of the market-place, and so stood the Kirk of the Holy Rude. In those days there was hardly an inactive hour in the church. There were 50-60 Saints' days a year, each of which meant a half-holiday at least for everyone. And here in Stirling the church contained 20 altars, and there was a priest for each, and every trade and craft contributed to their upkeep. And all the work we now call the Social Services was performed by the church – education, care of the poor and the sick and the feeble-minded. Indeed, the church was the only place where the community could gather together indoors. There was something about a burghal church which tugged at the heart-strings in a way no cathedral could. A cathedral was the charge of a bishop: it lacked

that close personal attraction which characterized the kirk at the centre of burghal life.

But, of course, things altered at the Reformation. There was a different outlook. Previous forms of worship and liturgy for which the church was built and later enlarged, disappeared and the Protestants had no use for such a large fabric as the Church of the Holy Rude. What they required was but a preaching station, and so the whole attitude changed. Seats were now becoming fashionable, and galleries were installed, including the King's Loft, where in 1598 sat James Sixth, when the senior minister, Patrick Symson, alluding to the king's attempts to introduce a modified episcopacy, rudely rebuked him to his royal face for 'manifest idolatry', whereupon the monarch 'forbade him to meddle with these matters'.

The upkeep of such a fabric placed a great burden upon the Magistrates and Town Council of Stirling as heritors, and even although in 1643 the Town Council 'seeing the charge of the said parochine is so grite and wechtie', provided for the appointment of a minister of the Second Charge. This was not successful in so far as it led to the unhappy schism involving James Guthrie, and the result was the division in 1656 of Stirling Church into two, the East and West Churches, separated by a solid wall built up between the two western piers of the crossing. Sometimes the West church was used for worship, sometimes for secular purposes, sometimes it was just empty. Later troubles led to the deposition in 1740 of the Rev. Ebenezer Erskine, who was minister of the Second Charge, and who became founder of the First Secession Church.

This church has been the place of worship of kings and queens of Scotland, and it is still used on all special occasions, such as the Kirkin' of the Town Council, Remembrance Day services, the Quarto-Centenary of the death of John Knox, who often preached here. But its main claim to fame is the fact that it is the only church still used for worship in Scotland today which has witnessed a Coronation. This took place on 29 July 1567, when the infant king James, then 13 months old, was solemnly crowned King James Sixth of Scotland. Mary, then a prisoner in Lochleven Castle, had five days before resigned the crown in favour of her infant son. The ceremony was according to Protestant rites, John Knox preaching the Coronation sermon, and the great building, 208 feet in length, was crowded by nobles and knights, ministers and burghesses, on that memorable day. The king was anointed by Adam Bothwell, Bishop of Orkney, who had embraced the Reformed faith, and the crown was held over the royal head by the Earl of Mar, ancestor of the present Earl, whose late grandfather was chairman of the National Restoration Committee of 1936.

That committee received over £40,000 in donations and legacies,

but in 1963 it was decided that the ravages of time must be arrested and that our generation should continue and complete the work of restoration and preservation. A further £50,000 was raised by well-wishers from within and from without the congregation, and a new heating system was installed, the stonework of the walls preserved and the stone tracery of the windows renewed where necessary . . . these were the main items.

Throughout its long history there have been many architectural alterations to the church, most of them not very praise-worthy, such as the erection of numerous wooden galleries and lofts, the concealing of the timber roof by a bogus plaster vault, the pulling down of porches and chapels, but the most drastic of all was the building of a wall between the nave and the choir in 1656, the result, as already mentioned, of a religious squabble so heated that the Town Council as heritors of the church gave authority 'to build up a partitioun in the Church for shunning of farther controversie'. This discreditable wall stood until 21 April 1940, when the undivided church, with its united congregations, was revealed in all its former glory and beauty.

Mention might be made of the St. Andrew's Aisle, or Chapel, a charming piece of fifteenth-century architecture, containing the only window with pre-Reformation tracery, and a Choral Missal, a book dating from 1496, written on vellum, with the ancient music signs and the words in Latin for the different festivals of the Christian year. It is bound in leather and studded with brass, and reveals the wonderful artistry of olden times. Above the screen separating the nave from the chapel is the Royal Coat of Arms which probably first graced the Royal Loft in the East church after the erection of the dividing wall in 1656. They were correctly blazoned in their colourful splendour by the Society of Friends of the Church of the Holy Rude in 1959, and placed in their present position. The same Society was also responsible for the beautiful choir stalls in 1965, a work of creative skill and craftsmanship, occupying some 9000 hours of working time. The Colours in the church are those of the 7th Battalion, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, and the 1st Battalion, the Scots Guards.

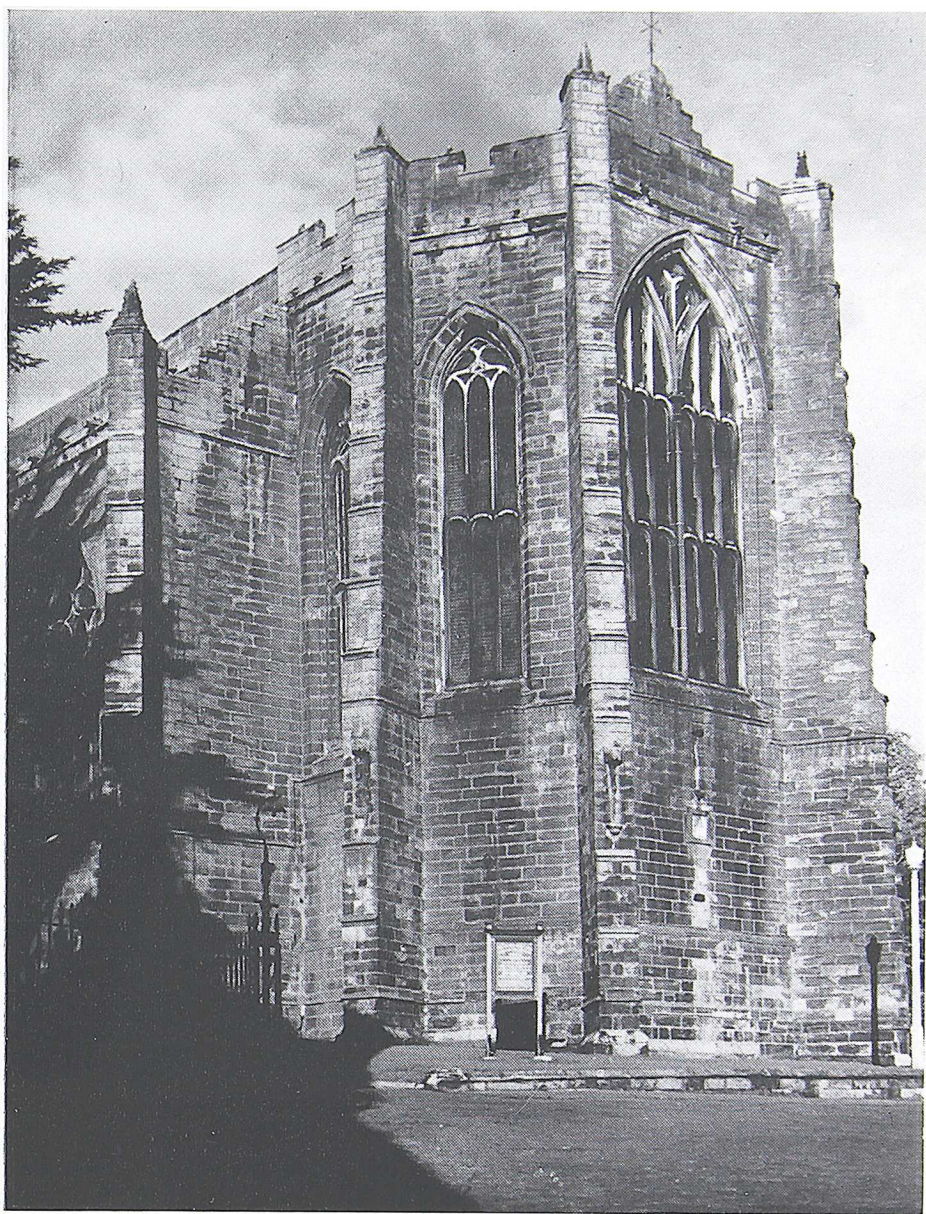
The church possesses an Easter Sepulchre, and in it on Good Friday was laid an effigy representing Christ, and vigil was kept till Easter morning. There are also several consecration crosses. In 1970 a new peal of bells was installed, and the oldest of the existing ones, the Saint's or Mary Bell, used long before the Reformation, is now to be seen in the church. The organ is a famous one, with 4289 pipes, ranging in length from less than half an inch to 32 feet, and was gifted in 1939. It was thoroughly overhauled in 1967. A Sepulchral Chalice was unearthed during the recent restoration. There are only

two others in Scotland like it, and, although over 400 years old and somewhat scarred by the ravages of time, it is still in a wonderful state of preservation. The Communion Chalice now used is an exquisite piece of workmanship and is based on that in Cork Cathedral. We have also a shoe buckle once worn by John Knox, and one of the three copies still in existence of Guthrie's speech on the scaffold in 1661 written in his secretary's handwriting.

Dr. Thomas Ross, joint author with his colleague David MacGibbon of the three-volumed *Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland*, who was responsible for the restoration of the nave in 1911-14, writes of the peculiar excellence of our Stirling church: 'Its state of preservation, its undoubted picturesque quality, and its unrivalled situation would all seem fitted to make it a place of pilgrimage. In addition, we may venture to say that it has the most distinctive personality, if we may use such a term, of all our Scottish churches. The peculiar tower at the west end and the apse at the east treated in a manner unknown anywhere else, surprise the beholder with a sense of novelty and dignity, with an added impression of its entire Scottish character, which last quality does not hold with many of our earlier churches.'

Yes, on all occasions of national mourning or rejoicing, the Church of the Holy Rude has been and still is the meeting place of the town's people, and for such purposes no finer building could be found. It is indelibly linked with the history of our Scottish nation.

C. B. EDIE



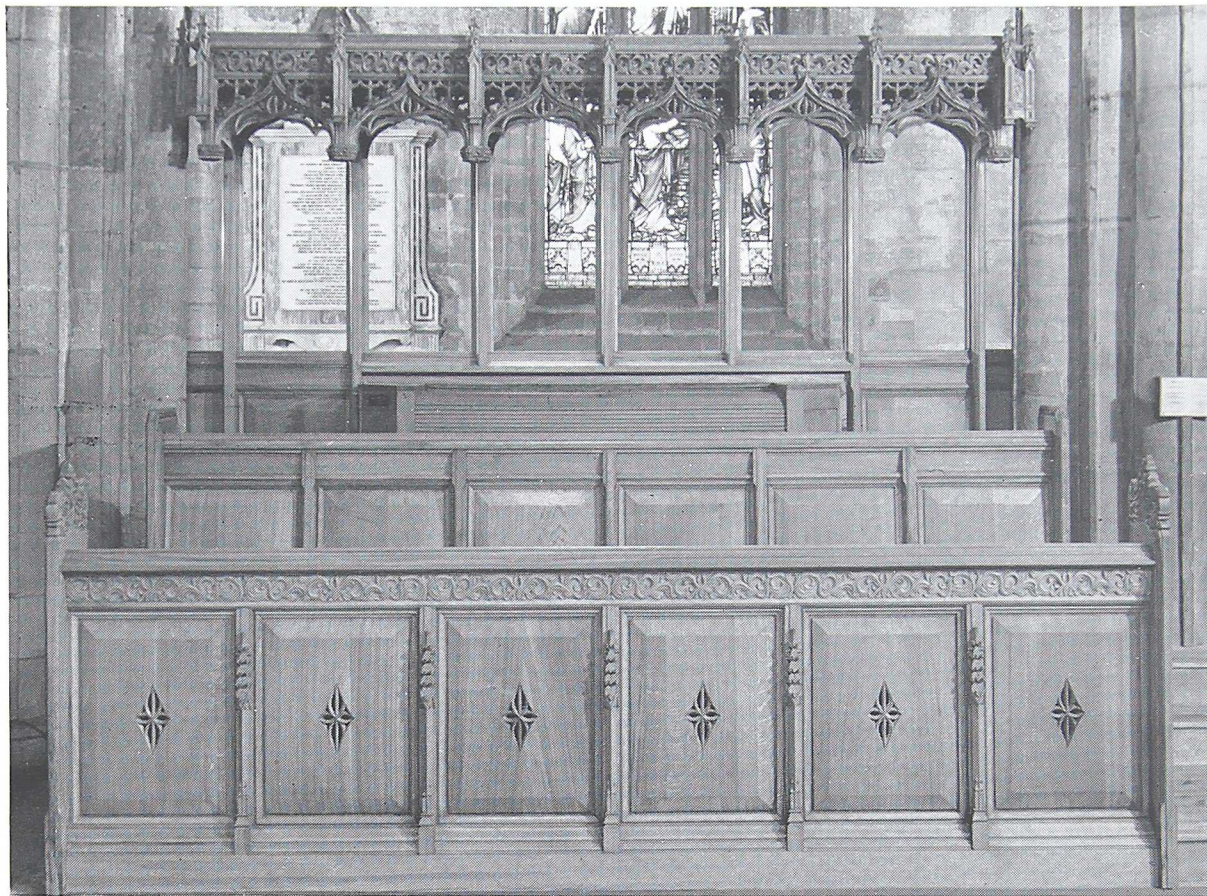
The Church of the Holy Rude, Stirling



Nave – looking west, showing partition wall



Nave – looking east



One section of choir
stalls with
organ console