

THE KIRK OF PERTH
(St. John the Baptist's)
ANNIVERSARY YEAR

The second issue of the Church Service Society's *Annual* contained an article by the Reverend Walter E. Lee, D.D., Minister of St. John's Kirk of Perth, in which he traced the long and interesting history of the Kirk from before its official 'foundation' by King David I in 1126 through its mediaeval period, celebrated in Scott's *Fair Maid of Perth*; its part in the violent beginning of the Reformation after Knox's famous and fateful sermon in 1559; its architectural and liturgical vicissitudes in succeeding centuries culminating in the superb restoration under Sir Robert Lorimer in 1926 to ensure its preservation as one of the outstanding places of worship in Scotland.

The year 1976 marks the end of the first half century since that restoration was completed, and the eight hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Kirk's foundation. This article is written to give some account of the further improvements and matters of liturgical interest which have developed in these fifty years. For most of that period the church was fortunate to have as its minister Dr. William A. Smellie, whose character was a sanctified blend of evangelical enthusiasm, historical perspicacity, aesthetic awareness and liturgical propriety, for which St. John's provided the perfect setting. To these estimable spiritual qualities ought to be added an undoubted organizational skill and a quite remarkable ability to find the resources, both financial and technical, that were required to fulfil his abiding dream of not only preserving the ancient shrine but adding constantly to its wealth of spiritual treasure and keeping it in tune with the best movements of the day.

After the completion of the 1926 restoration, the kirk seemed perfectly equipped for the function of worship. The nave was furnished with chairs for the congregation; the transepts had pews—the gift of the City's Guildry Incorporation, with the front pews handsomely carved with the figures of the Beasts of St. John's Kirk: the choir was fitted with prayer desks and choirstalls and the organ was housed behind a magnificently carved oak casing. The choir did not extend the full length of the eastern part of the building but ended some two bays short of the east wall, a splendid screen being erected at this point behind the holy table. Beyond the screen to the east was a small area, presumably on the site of a Lady chapel, or perhaps the site of the original high altar.

In 1972, at the instance of Dr. Smellie, a significant change was

effected in the layout of St. John's in order to provide two valuable additions to its use. First, a type of nave altar was introduced. This table was placed upon a new oak platform, built out from the choir steps and covering almost the entire area of the crossing. It is an elegant table of simple design, the work of Mr. W. Schomberg Scott, who also designed the new lectern and font in contemporary style and materials. The font is of wrought iron and copper, the stand being of wrought iron which is fashioned at the base to include the form of a fish, symbolic of the element of water, while the basin is of shining copper. The lectern likewise is iron; upon its cross beams there is strung a length of leather, which provides the surface on which the Book rests and underneath a pouch in which alternative versions of the Scriptures are contained. It was Dr. Smellie's growing belief that great churches should be repositories of the art and skill of every generation, including especially the contemporary.

The removal or rather the replacement in the main church of table, font and lectern made it possible to achieve the second important change in the layout and function of the building. Lorimer's screen which stood behind the communion table was now moved westwards by the length of one bay, thus enlarging the area near the east wall. In this enlarged area the original font, lectern and table were housed; new side screens were erected between pillars to enclose the chapel from the north and south aisles of the choir. The new chapel, visible from the nave through Lorimer's open screen, is unofficially styled the John Knox Chapel (though surely John would be surprised to say the least at the attachment of his name to a chapel in the manner of a canonized saint!) and provides a perfect place of worship for early morning service each Sunday, for smaller weddings, for any special occasions when less than one hundred people are likely to be present. The key to the uniqueness of its atmosphere is surely the skill with which Mr. Schomberg Scott has designed the new side screens, which though modern and striking in shape and colour nevertheless marry well with Lorimer's more conventional work. The present writer, accustomed to a communion table in the east end of a church, admires the courage of both Dr. Smellie and Mr. Scott in making these ambitious and radical changes. Undoubtedly they are aesthetically successful – comments of a critical tone are now less frequently voiced. Liturgically and practically they are of immense value.

Among Dr. Smellie's other notable achievements was the creation of the Trust for St. John's Kirk and the Society of Friends of St. John's. The former body, representing many aspects of the life of the city and county, carefully manages a sizeable capital fund built up over the years for the upkeep and maintenance of the ancient fabric, which receives no support from any state or civic source. The Friends

have made it their concern in recent years to provide items of ecclesiastical adornment. A fine example of their generosity was the gift in 1974 of sets of pulpit falls and prayer desk frontals in the colours of the Christian year—they chose the Sarum colours as being the best known. An entire article could be devoted to a description of the intricate splendour of this work—let it be enough to say that the use of silks and velvets, of threads and leathers in silver and gold, of coloured stones and imaginative three-dimensional devices has ensured that these furnishings immediately create a sense of worship appropriate to the season or festival. Anyone visiting St. John's may see these fabrics and furnishings by prior arrangement with the Minister.

The Friends recently joined with members of the congregation and others in providing a fitting memorial to their late minister, Dr. Smellie, in the form of new communion cups and plates. These again are of modern design, the work of Mr. A. S. Cairncross, chairman of the Friends and a member of a famous firm of goldsmiths in the city, the cups being tall and deep and, like the plates bearing the *Agnus Dei* symbol, long associated with St. John the Baptist. When set side by side with the ancient communion plate, which includes the Mary cup, reputedly given by Mary Queen of Scots or by her mother, Mary of Guise, and the later but equally handsome Nuremberg cup and the English Steeple Cups, they speak clearly to worshippers of the communion of saints—a local fellowship that spans more than four centuries and of course the wider fellowship that spans eternity.

Mr. Schomberg Scott must receive one further word of commendation and gratitude. Above the crossing at the easternmost arch of the nave he caused a large plain cross of wood to be suspended. There is no cheap drama or cheap decoration in this object. At times it seems to fill the whole length of the church so that in certain lights one is almost uncertain of its precise position—a church filled by the empty Cross is surely perfection in the use of living symbolism.

Perth is a city no longer. At the recent reorganization of local government the Town Council was replaced by a District Council whose territorial responsibilities cover roughly speaking the former counties of Perth and Kinross. On the last Sunday of their final year in office the Lord Provost of Perth, his magistrates and councillors, walked in procession to the mother kirk of the city and, as a parting gift 'to commemorate the centuries of association between the City and Royal Burgh and St. John's Kirk', they unveiled a stained glass window. This window, the work of a local artist, Mr. Harvey Salvin, is at the west end of the north wall of the nave and has two lights. It is in a semi-abstract style and is the only

window in St. John's which departs from the traditionally representational form. It contains amid a profusion of many coloured panes six symbols, each of which has both a biblical and a civic reference. For example, the crown at once reminds the viewer that Perth was the ancient capital and royal seat of Scotland and that the crown of thorns and the crown of glory are central themes in the Gospel of Christ. Similarly the other symbols, the keys, the ears of corn, the gateway, the fish and the river, have both a local reference and a religious relevance.

In its Sunday services, the Kirk of Perth has for many years followed the best traditions of Reformed worship. The structure of the worship is that of the *missa sicca*, though with a monthly celebration of Holy Communion as well as celebrations at the great festivals 'sicca' is perhaps less appropriate than it once was as an epithet. Responses and Amens, the Kyrie Eleison, the Sanctus and Benedictus are used invariably, and the Creed is always used. The music represents the best in 'ancient and modern' both instrumentally and chorally.

Like other downtown charges, St. John's suffers the difficulty of continuing its work as people move to suburban areas; but we believe that the future of the Kirk in Perth will be likely for a very long time to be centred on the Kirk of Perth.

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