

St Bride's Parish Church, Sanquhar

SANQUHAR has for long been a place of considerable importance. Its name is generally derived from the Celtic "Sean Caer," referring to an "old fort" believed to have stood on a knove a little to the north-east of the Parish Church. The old spelling was "Senechar," later "Sanchar," which is still the local pronunciation. Granted a charter as a Free Burgh of Barony by James III. in 1484 to replace charters lost by war and fire—one said to have been granted by William the Lion and another by Robert the Bruce—Sanquhar became a Royal Burgh by favour of James VI. in 1598. As capital of upper Nithsdale and in the heart of the Covenanting struggle, Sanquhar was chosen by Richard Cameron and by James Renwick for their Declarations of 1680 and 1685, which they nailed to the old Market Cross. Four other Declarations were made in Sanquhar after the Revolution, and the whole countryside with its moors, glens, and passes is steeped in Covenanting memories.

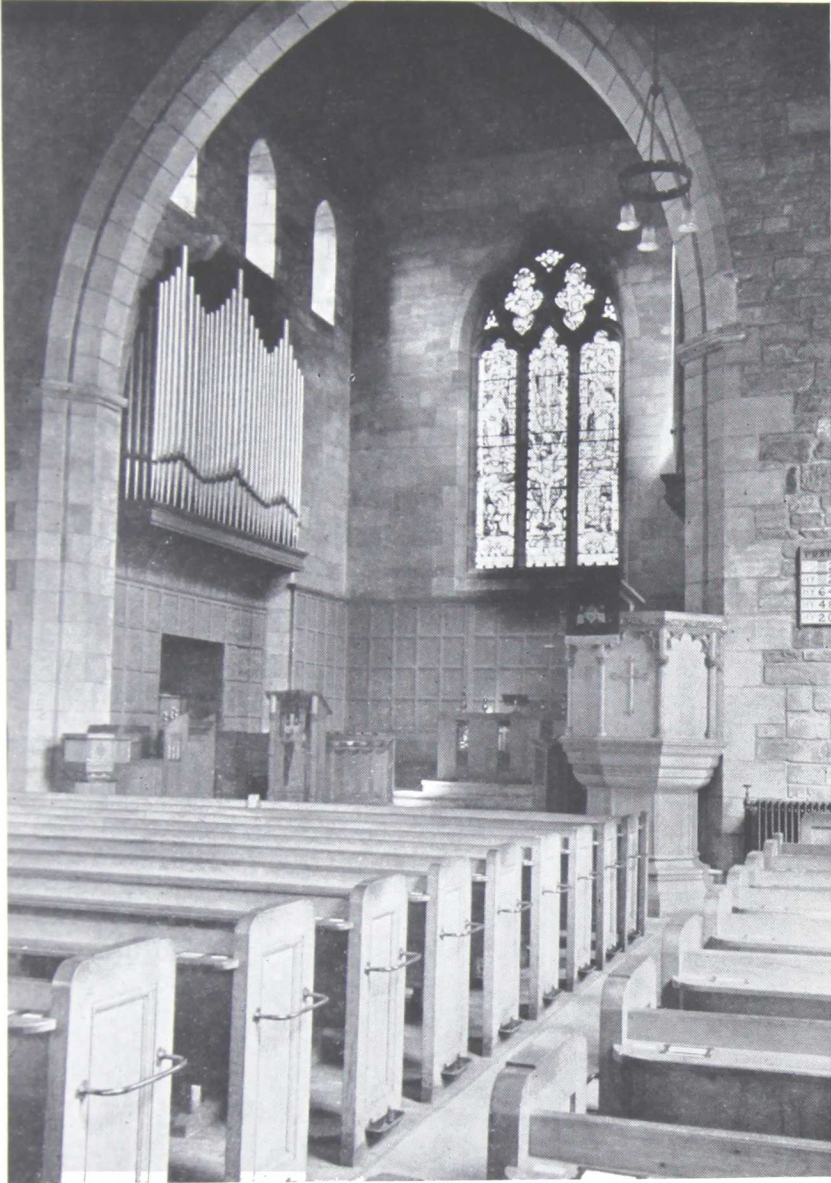
Its ruined Castle, with its moat and deer park at the south end of the town, goes back at least before the thirteenth century, and holds about it a cluster of stirring stories and traditions of Douglases, Wallace, and Crichtons. More than once the English captured and held it. Kings were entertained there—possibly James IV. and certainly James VI. The lavish hospitality offered to the latter by Lord Sanquhar helped to plunge him into the debt that forced the sale of Castle and lands to the Earl of Queensberry, from whose family it passed by purchase in 1894 to the late Marquis of Bute, descendant by the female line of the Crichtons.

The Parish Church site, a piece of rising ground to the north-east of the town, has for many centuries borne a sacred building. Tradition tells of a Celtic church, and is supported by discoveries about the site of stones with Celtic ornament. The date of the church previous to the present building is uncertain, but what evidence there is points back at least to the thirteenth century. To judge from fragments which remain, the church had been an elegant structure in the lancet or sharply-pointed early Gothic style, and the late Mr J. Jeffrey Waddell, I.A.,



Photograph by J. C. Gair, Dumfries.

ST. BRIDE'S PARISH CHURCH, SANQUHAR.
(Showing New Chancel and Transept—Original church had three bays and four pinnacles.)



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ST. BRIDE'S PARISH CHURCH, SANQUHAR. (CHANCEL.)



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ST. BRIDE'S PARISH CHURCH, SANQUHAR. (CHANCEL AND TRANSEPT.)

architect for the renovation scheme, put the date about 1250. The plan was traced in 1895 when the late Marquis of Bute (by his oldest title "Lord Crichton of Sanquhar") bore the cost of excavations under the direction of Mr S. Hultz, London. This work revealed the building to have been 96 feet long and 30½ feet broad, with the choir occupying about half of the full length. Probably it was in this church, as suggested by the Rev. Dr Wm. M'Millan, Dunfermline, that the "Admirable Crichton," born at Eliock House in the parish, would be baptized. This was also one of the last parish churches in Scotland where Mass was celebrated, the Rector remaining devoted to the old faith and suffering imprisonment at Perth for his "cryme."

This early building, described in the First Statistical Account as being "in a most ruinous condition," was taken down in 1823, gunpowder being necessary to break the stout walls. It was succeeded by the present church, built on a much broader and shorter plan and opened on 28th March, 1824. It was then a plain substantial structure with a square pinnacled tower at the west end, in style showing the influence of the Gothic revival. The south wall followed the old foundations on that side. Externally its appearance was more handsome than the interior, which had box pews, partly replaced later by more modern seating, a deep horse-shoe gallery, and the pulpit with precentor's box below it set on the west wall and entered from a small vestry in the tower. Originally the Communion Table was surrounded by rails in un-Presbyterian fashion.

The traditional dedication was to St Bride (or Brigit) whose name is given also to a well near by the church. The old name was revived after Church Union in 1929. For some years before that date the minister, the Rev. James Richmond Wood, and the Kirk Session had in view a renovation of the church. Substantial contributions were given by the late Mr John Samson and his wife (to provide a Thank-Offering Chancel), the late Lord Glendyne, the late Mr James Moffat, and other amounts were gathered in by the Kirk Session. Plans were provisionally prepared by the late Dr Macgregor Chalmers, but the war of 1914-18 held up the project and latterly Mr Wood felt unable to see it through. On his death in 1929 he left a generous bequest towards this work which had been so much in his thought, and the carrying of it out passed to his successor, the present minister.

Fresh plans, embodying partly the ideas of Dr Macgregor Chalmers but opening out a larger scheme both of renovation and extension, were submitted by Mr Jeffrey Waddell and approved. A grant of £1000 was promised by the Baird Trust, and work began in April, 1930. One serious difficulty which conditioned the whole scheme was that graves and graveyard paths surrounded the building right along the walls, and the aim had to be to modernise the church in keeping with its fine exterior within those limits of space. The general plan included clearing the entire interior, removing the gallery, stripping the ceiling and plaster from the walls, taking down the east gable and part of the north wall, and lifting the flagstone floor. Provision was made for a chancel by securing permission from all surviving relatives connected with graves at the east end of the church, and also from the Bute Trustees to build over those graves and over the ancient Crichton burial vault. Concrete piers were sunk between graves to support steel beams on which the chancel walls were built. The new church thus extends over the area occupied by the choir of the thirteenth century building. The headstones displaced were arranged against the outside walls to correspond as nearly as possible with their original position.

Opportunity was taken to throw out a transept, necessarily shallow, over the heating chamber on the north side. On the south side of the chancel is built the vestry and above it the Session House, and on the north side the organ chamber—both flat-roofed. The chancel and transept open to the nave by high pointed arches. On either side of the chancel are the organ arches, and above each three clerestory windows.

The outside mason-work and the interior of the chancel are of ashlar, obtained from Hamilton Palace. The inside walls have been pointed and left bare.

On the lintel of the entrance door to the vestry appears the name of the church and the date of renovation. Above is a large sculptured stone showing a wreath of oak leaves and acorns which has within it the everburning lamp—traditional symbols of St Bride. The chancel gable is surmounted with a plain stone cross.

A new gallery has been erected at the west end, to which access is given by a circular stair built out from the south base of the tower. The underside of the gallery and the whole roof of the church are lined with pine wood, leaving

the roof couples clear right to the ridge. New wooden flooring is laid over asphalt, and a new heating system has also been installed. Lavatory accommodation has been provided at three points. The main entrance is retained through the tower doorway, and to mitigate the west winds a glazed screen with swing doors forms an inner porch. On a centre pane this children's prayer is inscribed—a happy thought of the architect :

O Lord Jesus Christ,
 Who as a Child
 Wast found in
 Thy Father's House,
 Make us to love
 His House on earth
 As Thou dost love it,
 And bring us at last
 To Thy House in Heaven
 Where Thou livest
 And reignest
 With the Father
 And the Holy Ghost
 Ever One God
 World without end
 Amen

The seating of the church, which provides accommodation for 740, is of oak throughout, as are also the gallery front, the panelling of the chancel walls and roof, and the transept ceiling. The oak is natural colour and waxed only for finish. Fawn carpeting to match the oak covers all the seats.

The chancel furniture, all of the finest oak, and mainly gifted by various donors, includes the Communion Table, open in design and richly traceried ; the Pulpit, a memorial from the congregation to their late minister, Mr Wood ; the Font, Lectern, and Reader's Desk ; Elders' and Choir Stalls, the former carved at each end to show scenes from the Life and Ministry of our Lord.

The chancel steps and floor are of white and green marble, and the Communion Table stands on a raised marble base.

The organ by a Glasgow firm is a mellow-toned instrument of ample compass and is set on one side of the chancel with a balancing front on the other side, both faced with oak screens. Power is provided by an electric motor. Electric lighting is also installed, current being led at first by underground cable from a local supply until the County Scheme reached the district a few years later.

The commanding beauty of the whole church which irresistibly draws the worshippers' eyes is the chancel window, divided into three lights by stone mullions and surmounted by tracery of stone which intertwines to bind the lights together. It is filled with rich lustrous stained glass, the gift of the congregation and the work of Messrs J. T. and C. E. Stewart, Glasgow. With a bold sweep of treatment and a wealth of symbolism the upper side-lights of the window depict the Self-Revelation of Christ in emblems of His Ministry borne by four angel-figures—the Light of the World, the Good Shepherd, the Vine, the Bread of Life. The lower side-lights portray the Annunciation and the Revelation of the Resurrection to Mary Magdalene, while three Crosses stand in the radiance of day-break. In the lower middle-light Christ is shown upon the Cross, full of virile appeal and recalling His prophecy: "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me." Above is the Triumphant Lord risen and ascending, His hands raised in blessing. Robed in purple and relieved against a jewelled back-ground, His majestic dignity makes the claim: "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

The two-light and single-light windows of the transept, which form part of the memorial to the late minister, appropriately represent three aspects of the prophetic office—his personal consecration in the vision and call of Isaiah, his heritage from the past in the falling of Elijah's mantle on Elisha, and his life-work in John the Baptist's preparing of the way of the Lord. Incidental rather than transcendental in treatment and more subdued in colouring than the other two, this single light leads thought on naturally to the Ministry of Christ in the chancel window, suggesting the practical outcome of high inspiration and rich tradition.

A further two-light window with its subject Saint Bride is at present being prepared by the same artist to balance the transept window on the other side of the church. It has been made possible by a bequest from Miss Sarah Guthrie Brown, a devoted member of the church, and promises to be in most beautiful harmony with its companion windows.

On the east wall of the transept is a dedication tablet of moss-green and white marble, with the Burning Bush and consecration crosses picked out in gold. It bears this inscription:

"To the Glory of God this Transept with its windows and the Organ are dedicated in grateful memory of James

Richmond Wood, Minister of Sanquhar Parish, 1883 to 1929, whose labours and generosity chiefly made possible the renovation of this Church. 1930."

The chancel inscription is carved on the oak screen behind the Communion Table and records :

"To the Glory of God this Chancel was given by Mr and Mrs John Samson of Glaisnock, Cumnock, as a Thank-Offering for the preservation of the life of their son, Captain Hamish Weir Samson, M.C., during the Great War, and in special remembrance of 3rd May, 1917."

One of the minor problems in the alterations was where to place a stone effigy which had lain within ornamental railings in the south-west corner of the church. The figure is a life-size representation of a priest in full Mass vestments, and formerly occupied a niche on the north side of the choir of the pre-Reformation church, being known locally as "the saint of the choir." In 1823 when the old church was demolished the figure was removed to Friars' Carse, Dunscore, the home of Dr Crichton, founder of the Crichton Institution, Dumfries. There it had a refuge in the Hermitage, but none too safely, for the carving suffered considerable damage. In 1897 the Marquis of Bute secured permission to have the figure brought back and replaced in the church. It now rests in an arched recess on the east transept wall, having returned after a troubled history almost to its former position in the choir of the old church. Enough of the workmanship remains to show its skilful artistry.

Another link with the old building is the bell in use until 1928 and preserved in the vestibule. It was the gift of Charles Duke of Queensberry in 1725 along with three brass candelabra said to have been sold by the Kirk Session at one time as old brass, and later two Communion cups which are still in service. The bell summoned the worshippers of the new church for over a century and was replaced by an octave of bells which, with a clock and Westminster chimes, a hand-clavier, and automatic hymn-playing mechanism, forms a memorial to a former Session Clerk, Mr J. R. Wilson. A bronze tablet in the vestibule records it as the gift of his wife. During the alterations the floor of the tower-room and all the weight of mechanism had to be raised four feet in order to make way for the entrance to the gallery.

Beside the bell is a beautifully sculptured stone found in 1923, while a field at the King's Scaur on Newark Farm

was being ploughed. Unfortunately the head of the figure is missing, but experts have identified it as representing St Nicholas, to whom the chapel beside the Hospital of Sanquhar, known to have stood at the King's Scaur, was dedicated. This theory is supported by the companion figure of a boy at the saint's feet which recalls the old custom in cathedrals and collegiate churches of electing a "boy-bishop" on St Nicholas' Day. By a remarkable coincidence the stone was unearthed on the sixth of December. Chiselled out of local sandstone and dated by the curator of the Museum of the Society of Antiquaries, Edinburgh, as belonging to the early fifteenth century, the exquisite workmanship can still be traced in spite of weathering, especially on the bishop's stole with its fringe and on his crozier. For some years the figure stood outside Newark farmhouse, until in 1937 it was handed over by the late Mrs Thomson to the custody of the Kirk Session.

While the work was in progress, the congregation was invited to unite for worship with the North Church, formerly United Presbyterian. The arrangement proved most happy, so much so that when the North congregation was dissolved in 1932, most of its members joined St Bride's.

On 16th April 1931 the renovated church was re-opened and re-dedicated by the Moderator of the General Assembly, the Very Rev. Dr A. M. Bogle. Others taking part were the Moderator of Dumfries Presbytery, the Rev. J. M. Forbes, Ph.D.; the Depute Clerk, the Rev. C. Rolland Ramsay, M.A.; and the Minister, the Rev. W. S. Buchan, B.D. The windows and memorial tablet in the transept were unveiled by Miss Kay, one of the oldest friends of Mr Wood; the inscription in the chancel was unveiled by Mrs Samson; and the chancel windows by Mr James Thomson, senior Elder.

The total cost of the work was about £10,500—a large amount but fully justified in its result.

WM. S. BUCHAN.