

Coldingham Priory

COLDINGHAM Priory is not so well known as it deserves to be, although it played an important part in Scottish history from its foundation. Little remains today of the once magnificent Church, only the North and East walls of the Choir still stand. The Parish Church now occupies the ancient site of the Choir, embodying the original North and East walls, to which were added South and West walls, to form a church rectangular in shape, and measuring 95 feet by 35 feet. To a passer-by the church may appear to have a rather uninteresting exterior; but his surprise is all the greater on entering its precincts to find a Sanctuary of great beauty, and a church unique in Scotland. Here men have borne witness to the Christian faith, and have maintained Christian worship for nearly nine hundred years.

The origin of Coldingham Priory is linked with the story of a Scottish King. He was Edgar, King of Scots, who had been ousted from his throne by his uncle, Donald Bane. Determined to regain his throne he found the help he needed in England, and was soon making for the Scottish Border with a strong army. When he was at Durham on the way north, Edgar had a vision of St Cuthbert, who appeared to him and told him to take the consecrated banner of St Cuthbert, and to carry it at spear point at the van of his advancing forces, and he would thereby gain the victory over his usurping uncle. Edgar was victorious, and in gratitude to God for this victory he decided to build a Priory, to endow it richly, and to give it to the Benedictine monks of Durham.

The site chosen for the Priory was at Coldingham, then on one of the main routes from England to Scotland. The building began in 1098, and was largely completed by 1100, when the King himself was present for the dedication ceremony. The altar was dedicated to St Cuthbert, who had been instrumental in gaining Edgar his victory. So richly did he and subsequent monarchs endow the Priory that its lands extended over one eighth of Berwickshire. There are still preserved in the archives of Durham Cathedral over one thousand charters and documents of various kinds which are a mine of information about conditions in Church and State at that time.

As soon as the building of the Priory was completed, the Benedictine monks, with the industry characteristic of their Order, cultivated the lands with which they were endowed. They became also very successful sheep farmers, and in the course of time the Priory owned some two thousand sheep. There grew up a very profitable wool trade, and foreign merchants came to Coldingham to buy. There is a charter of Alexander III (1249-86) giving protection to these merchants, and forbidding the Mayor and Bailiffs of Berwick to molest them. Edward I of England established a weekly market and an annual fair in the town of Coldingham, and the Market Cross is still to be seen.

The Priory thus became extremely wealthy, and politically one of the most influential houses in Scotland. The Prior sat as a Baron in the Scottish Parliament, and exercised feudal jurisdiction over a wide area. At one time he was served by a retinue of over seventy functionaries, a number scarcely surpassed by the greatest noble in the land. The Prior, however, was in a most unenviable position, for the rich revenues of the Priory were the envy of the powerful nobles, and at the same time he was dependent upon their help to keep the lands of the Priory intact. Not only so, but because of the situation of the Priory near the Scottish Border, and of the swaying fortunes of Border warfare, the Priory was forced to swear fealty now to a Scottish King, now to an English King.

It appears that the Priory enjoyed a fairly peaceful existence for the first hundred years. Then, in 1216, it was put to flames by King John of England. A more magnificent building than that of Edgar's replaced the old. In 1485 a King was coveting the revenues of the Priory. He was James V, who had built a Royal Chapel at Stirling, and was desperately in need of funds with which to endow it. He declared that Coldingham Priory should be suppressed and its revenues appropriated for this purpose. This the Earl of Home and other powerful nobles would not permit, and the Battle of Sauchieburn was fought, at which King James was slain. In 1509, after four centuries as a "cell" of Durham, the Priory was loosed from Durham and was attached to the Abbey of Dunfermline.

The next one hundred and fifty years saw the waning fortunes of Coldingham Priory. In 1544, the Earl of Hertford, in a raid across the Border, destroyed the Border Abbeys and the nave and transepts of the Priory. These were rebuilt, but very soon afterwards came the Reformation,

and the Priory lands fell into secular hands. But even so, its ruin was only partial, for in 1560 Coldingham gave accommodation for one night to twenty-six thousand foot-soldiers led by Lord Grey of Wilton, on their way to the siege of Leith. And in 1566 Mary Queen of Scots is said to have spent a night at the Priory with a large retinue, on her way to Edinburgh after her serious illness at Jedburgh. Margaret Irwin describes the scene in her novel, *The Gay Gaillard*. The last scene in the story of the Priory took place in 1648, when Cromwell and his men were on their way to Dunbar. They found their way barred by the Royalists who had fortified the Priory. A battle ensued in which the Royalists were forced to surrender, and the Priory was blown up by gunpowder, only the North and East walls of the Choir and a tower remaining.

After Cromwell's visit the Priory remained in ruins until, in 1662, the first Parish Church was erected. This church, too, had to weather turbulent times. When John Dysart, a staunch Presbyterian, was admitted as minister of the parish, the military had to be called in to quiet his hostile Episcopal flock, and for the first years of his ministry he ascended the pulpit with two loaded pistols, which he laid on either side of the Bible while he conducted the service. But these troublous times passed and more peaceable times succeeded, as another outstanding minister of the church bears witness, James Landell, a keen musician, who composed a psalm tune which he called "Coldingham".

It was not until 1854 that the fine architectural features of the Priory began to be appreciated. The beautiful North and East walls of the Choir were obscured by steep galleries, and the walls were whitewashed. The Pulpit was placed in the centre of the South wall, and the boxed pews were fixed on either side and in front of it. Apart from the church the Priory was left in a state of pitiable neglect. At last, in 1854, work was started (1) to renovate the interior of the Church; and (2) to excavate the surrounding grounds. The work in the church itself included the removing of the ugly galleries, thus exposing the original North and East walls to view. The West wall was rebuilt in imitation of the original walls by an Ayton mason. The position of the Pulpit and seating remained as before. The roof and ceiling were renewed.

As for the excavation, it was most rewarding. It was possible to mark the positions of the Nave, the North and South Aisles and Transepts, the Chapter House and

Dormitories, the Parlour, a Cloister Arcade and Well, the Hospitium. The only part of the original King Edgar's building that remains is a fragment of the North wall of the hospitium, known locally as "Edgar's wa's". Articles of antiquarian interest were also found, among which was a portable altar which may be seen in the Edinburgh Museum of Scottish Antiquities. There was no doubt that the Priory had at one time been a most magnificent building.

Built in the form of a Cross, it stood almost due East and West. The style of the remaining 13th century walls is partly Norman and partly first pointed. Externally, the northern elevation has single light lancet windows, divided from one another by broad shallow buttresses projecting only a few inches from the wall. On the lower elevation of the wall there are Norman arcades. The East wall agrees in style with the North, and is flanked by square turrets, their heads having sloping roofs, and their bases moulded. There is a hewn hollow in the sandstone in the lower elevation of the North wall near the East end, which is said to be a "lepers' squint", but its purpose cannot be stated definitely.

Looking at the walls from the interior, we find that, as on the exterior, there is the Norman arcade in the lower elevation, and the window arcade in the upper elevation. There is an open arcade of the thickness of the walls which forms a triforium, and is carried along the upper compartment, of sufficient depth to admit free passage round the building. The arches in the upper elevation are set in couplets between the windows, and together with the arches in the lower elevation give a beautiful variety of form to the general arrangement. The arches are supported by moulded shafts with very finely carved capitals ornamented with various kinds of foliage.

There are six stained glass windows, one of which bears the arms of the Stirlings of Glorat and Renton, and commemorates the holding by this family of the hereditary office of Forester of Coldingham from the beginning of the 13th century, for among the rich endowments of the Priory were the forests of Houndwood. Another commemorates David Milne Home of Milngraden, who originated the movement for the restoration of the Priory.

For many years it had been felt that this ancient historical building was worthy of a much finer setting than that provided by the 1854 renovation. The pulpit stood in the centre of the long South wall, which was a very

common practice in Scottish Churches, and in many it was done in a dignified and characterful manner. In the Priory, however, the church is so long and narrow, that not only must it have been extremely difficult for the preacher, but hearing, too, must have proved a problem to many. In addition the South wall is the plainest wall in the building, without any interest save that it served to preserve the original walls ; and most of the congregation had to sit facing this uninteresting wall.

The congregation decided, with the full approval and support of the Presbytery of Duns, to launch an appeal for funds for a new renovation of the interior. The appeal was made as widespread as possible, for it was felt that this ancient church was also a national monument and of interest far beyond the parish. The plan envisaged was to turn the seating of the church and face the congregation towards the 13th century East and North walls, and at the East end of the church to have a slightly raised Chancel area which would accommodate a Communion Table (which the former arrangement did not allow for), as a focal point, together with the Pulpit, Baptismal Font, Lectern, and Elders' Seats. By the generosity of several donors all the Chancel furnishings were gifted.

Messrs Gordon and Dey, A/A.R.I.B.A., Edinburgh, designed the new furnishings, keeping in mind the very lively and beautiful background. Consequently the furniture was kept as plain as possible to provide a resting place for the eye. This is particularly so in the case of the Holy Table, which is of a form having strong shadows capable of drawing the eye to it, in spite of the claims of the back wall. In the centre of the Table is a carving of the Cross, symbol of Man's redemption, against a gilded background, which throws up the Celtic form of the outline.

The Pulpit is also plain in form and has early Gothic Mouldings on the intersections of its front panels, the centre one of which carries a low relief carving of the Christian symbol of the Pelican in her piety. This is usually regarded as an emblem of Christ the Redeemer, although it has no Biblical authority. Early naturalists, noticing that the bird had a stain on its beak, believed that, while really pruning its feathers, it was feeding its nestlings with blood drawn from its own breast. Though founded on legend, this symbol is of very early origin as a symbol of self sacrifice. On the two side panels are the carvings of the Greek letters " Alpha " and " Omega ", the " Beginning "



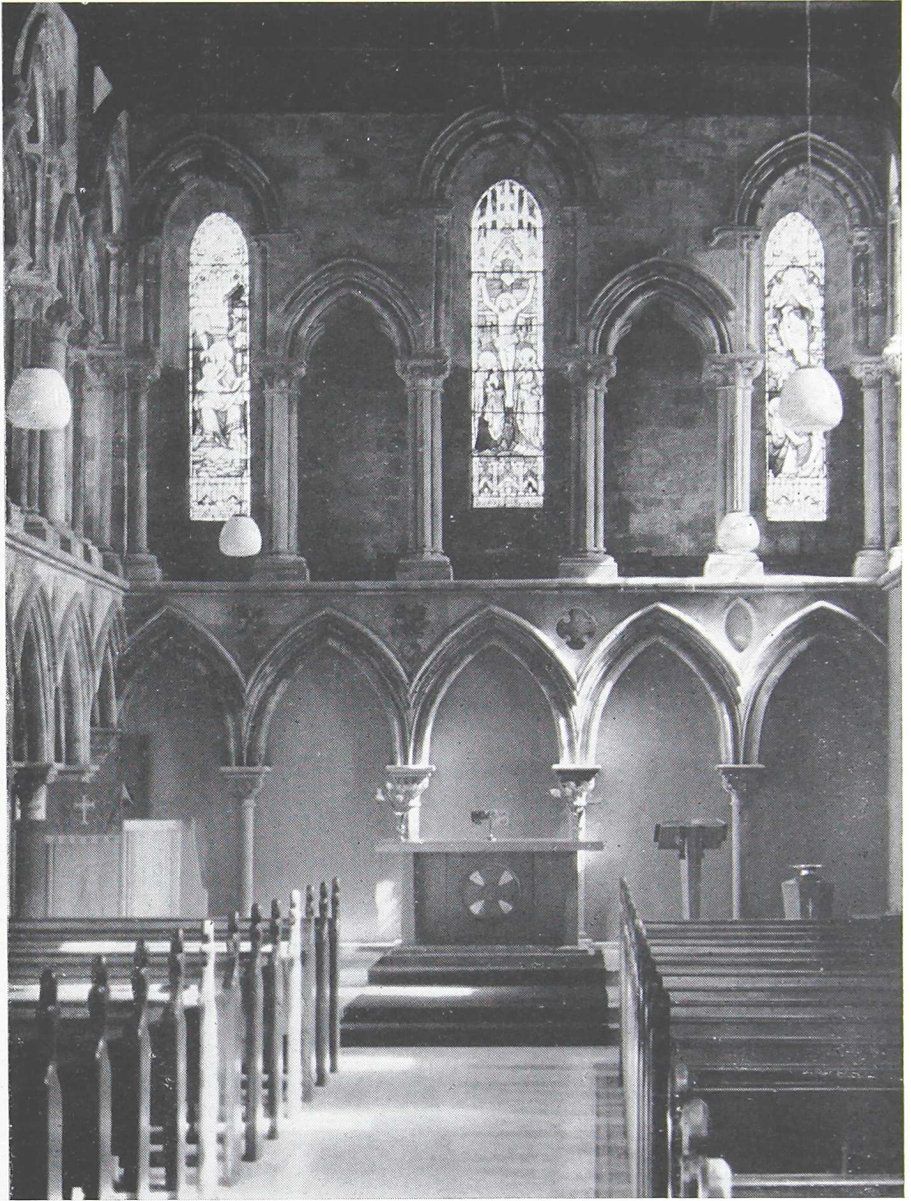
COLDINGHAM PRIORY: FROM SOUTH EAST, SHOWING CLOISTER GARTH, WELL, AND
ARCHWAY TO SOUTH AISLE

Photograph by The Scotsman, Edinburgh



COLDINGHAM PRIORY: INTERIOR LOOKING EASTWARD, BEFORE THE RESTORATION

Photograph by The Scotsman, Edinburgh



COLDINGHAM PRIORY: THE PRESENT CHANCEL

Photograph by Robert Nisbet, St. Abbs, Berwickshire

and the "End", representing the everlasting nature of our Lord. These two letters are depicted standing on small bands of Norman decoration, the Billet and the Chevron.

The Font is octagonal in shape and is designed as a support for the shallow silver bowl which is the vessel at present used at Coldingham, but it is also complete in itself. The front panel carries an incised and gilded Star, symbolic of the guiding Star, or the Star of Aspiration.

The Lectern has been kept plain and slim in order to prevent the rather narrow Chancel area seeming overcrowded. On the front face of the stem is a low relief carving of the Staff of St Cuthbert with his distinctive Cross depicted in the head. This provides the link between Coldingham and its Mother Church at Durham. Its place on the face of the main support of the bookboard can be regarded as symbolic of St Cuthbert carrying the Word from place to place as a Missionary of the Early Church.

Finally on the low chair behind the Table is a carving of the Celtic symbol of the Trinity, the Three in One. This particular form is known as the Triquetra, made by the interlacing of three segments of circles. One of the earliest uses of this symbol is on the breasts of the Evangelists in a sixth century manuscript in the library of Trinity College, Dublin.

The furniture is therefore designed to hold its own amid a very interesting setting and, though plain, has much to interest and provide food for thought.

Funds, however, did not permit the completion of the renovation as originally planned. A Pipe Organ from the former St Andrew's Church, Coldingham, was to be rebuilt in the Priory, this being necessary as it was a Memorial Organ. The intention was to house the Organ Chamber in the Vestry, and to make the South wall a little more interesting by providing an Organ case in front of a new opening from the Organ Chamber; the Organ console to be placed in front of the West wall. Unfortunately funds did not permit this to be done as planned, and the Organ had to be entirely rebuilt in front of the West wall, where it obscures a very interesting wall, and where it is obviously out of place. It is hoped that the present arrangement is only temporary, and that funds will become available to carry out the original intention, which will be more in keeping with the East end of the church. Something also might be done to make the South wall still more interesting.

The first stage, however, of the renovation was completed, and the church was re-opened on Easter Day, 1955. In a most impressive service the Rev. Ronald Selby Wright, D.D., Minister of the Canongate, Edinburgh, dedicated the new furnishings. There is still much more to be done, and all that can be done to give this ancient church a setting worthy of its past history will be very much worth while. There is an atmosphere of devotion in this place, making it easy to worship here. The worshipper has before him evidence of how men of the past expressed their faith so beautifully and with such great pains as those engaged upon a sacred task, who, in the medium of stone and lime expressed their joy and delight in their religion. These walls tell the story of nearly ten centuries of Christian witness. There is no Christian but must be deeply moved by this thought. That this church has survived its turbulent history reminds us that the Christian faith cannot be overthrown, and in this place, where so many have worshipped before us, we are assured that the Word of God stands and endures for ever.

W. HOWARD PURDIE