

Stobo Kirk

Six miles west of Peebles Stobo Kirk stands on rising ground a couple of hundred yards to the north of the Tweed. This is a hilly land, and Peeblesshire has only a narrow strip of arable running beside the Tweed and its tributaries. By Lothian standards even this is little more than marginal land, but in earlier times, as the remains of terrace cultivation and rig-and-furrow ploughing show, still poorer land was cultivated at a higher level. As this is written in October 1967, a field of oats is being harvested in Stobo at 1100 feet above sea level, but in Roman times this hilly land supported a population at least as great as that of today. Between 450 and 500 Bronze and Iron Age sites—two thirds of them habitations and homesteads—have been identified in this county and this list may be extended in time. At Stobo there happens to be on the north bank of Tweed a considerable stretch of hill which, by Dark Age standards, was fit for settlement, and this is presumably the reason for the existence of a church of such early traditions. Native British forts are numerous in the neighbourhood. In 1955 aerial photography revealed a fort of Agricola's time at Easter Happrew in Stobo. This lay within the area covered by the Ninth Legion under its commander Gaius Caristanius Fronto, the son-in-law of that Sergius Paulus before whom Paul preached in Cyprus. Within three miles of the Roman fort are five native forts where the defence works were halted and left unfinished, and a little further away are seven more ; their construction, it would seem, was due to the Roman advance north and the flight of native population before them, and the interruption of work to the actual arrival of a Roman force. Other forts of post-Roman date may be counted the work of later Britons who fled north to escape the Angles and Saxons. This new wave of population was largely Christian and remained so, as may be seen from the Ettrick, Yarrow, and Manor inscribed stones ; to them is probably due the beginnings of the Church in southern Scotland. The older churches of Tweeddale are found near these British settlements where the tributaries of Tweed join the main stream. Stobo Kirk is one such and while, as is usual in these matters, explicit proof is lacking, there is reason to hold that it dates from the sixth century. Its dedication is to St. Mungo, for what it is worth,



STOBO KIRK : FROM SOUTH EAST

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STOBO KIRK : SOUTH DOORWAY

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tends to confirm this. A long stone, now lying horizontal in the west wall of the north aisle, was probably a standing stone to begin with and so marked a site which had pre-Christian associations. This countryside continued to be British by race and language until the twelfth century, for the English invasion halted at the bounds of Yarrow. Gaelic names in this county date from about the eleventh century ; English names appear in the twelfth century, and the older names are Cymric or British.

When the parish system took shape in the twelfth century Stobo covered a wide area including the later parishes of Lyne, Broughton, Dawyck, Drumelzier, Tweedsmuir and perhaps Glenholm. This pattern of a mother church and its scattered chapels which later become independent reflects the form of the Church at a time when the faith was being preached in a pagan countryside. Elsewhere a charge of this nature was known as a plebania and other Scottish examples are found at Kinkell and Dunbar. When David I, in his time as Prince of Cumbria, made his enquiry into the ancient possessions of the see of Glasgow Stobo was listed among them. The church lay within the diocese, but the land of Stobo, as distinct from that served by its dependent churches, was an estate of the Bishop. The rural deanery, like the castle, burgh, and sheriffdom of Peebles, must date from the time of David I, but until near the close of the twelfth century the deanery was sited at Stobo, thus confirming the early importance of the church. Peter, the dean of Stobo, is recorded in the last decade of the century, but after 1200 we read of a dean of Peebles. After this date we read of parsons or rectors of Stobo, and of vicars, for the rectory had been appropriated to endow a prebend of Glasgow Cathedral.

The canon or rector had his home in the manse of Stobo in the Drygate of Glasgow and on the eve of the Reformation enjoyed a revenue from his appropriated parish of 2000 marks, together with another 1000 from Broughton. This provided more than a comfortable living for Master Adam Colquhoun, parson of Stobo, who died in February 1542, leaving us well informed on his many possessions because of the inventory prepared for the lawsuit between Peter Colquhoun, his nephew, and the two illegitimate sons of the late canon. The inventory lists household furnishings such as the carved bed decorated with gold and provided with a feather mattress containing 140 pounds of down, panels of arras, and a brass chandelier. The canon's clothes included

uneclesiastical garments, a doublet of cramoisie velvet lined with scarlet, a silk belt with gold tassels, and a gown of damask lined with marten sable. He had much wealth in silver and gold, some curious items such as the one entered in the inventory as "a bird, viz. a parrok", a horse and a complete set of armour, a silk dog leash, a dog collar studded with silver, and a chiming clock, as well as a private oratory with sacramental vessels and vestments. The canon's kinsman, John Colquhoun, who did the work as vicar of the parish, is unlikely to have been so well provided.

Because of its close associations with the bishop and cathedral Stobo Kirk was somewhat better built than was usual on Tweedside. Our local stone is a whin which splits and builds well enough when properly used and regularly maintained, but older walls about here have earthen cores and rapidly deteriorate when neglected. Harling on the walls conceals the full pattern of the masonry of Stobo Kirk but good ashlar in sandstone is exposed at the voids, and more can vaguely be seen when heavy rain soaks the harling. Partly because of this superior masonry and partly because of good care by lairds and parishioners in the past the Kirk has been well preserved.

Stobo Kirk measures 81 feet long internally, and consists of a west tower, with nave, chancel, south porch, and north aisle. Most of it is of early twelfth century date and in this it is unique in the county. The building has been laid out by hand and eye, for it is some thirty degrees wrong in its orientation; nave, chancel, and tower are not on the same axis; and not two of the walls are exactly parallel. The tower, which rises to three storeys, was in decay in Covenanted times, and was reduced to its present height and roof level when economically repaired. A modern doorway, dating from the reconstruction of 1863, gives access to a stair leading to the laird's loft, and beneath this is a vestry opening through a modern doorway under an earlier arch into the west end of the nave. A south porch of late mediaeval date has the joughs in a case at the entrance, grooves on the jambs made by sharpening slate pencils or knives, a pointed barrel vault, and stone benches against the inside walls. Across its entrance is a step containing stones said to have been taken from the original chancel arch in 1863. A Norman doorway, with door of a single plank of cedar, opens into the nave, which measures 39 feet by 18 feet 6 inches. In the north wall opposite the porch is a Norman doorway or window which was found in 1863 to have a recess for a sliding bar 5 feet

long, and some traces of wall painting. This is now filled with stained glass. In the south wall are three windows of which two, though much restored, are of mediaeval date and once replaced the original small Norman ones. The third window, beneath the laird's loft, dates only from 1863.

Unfortunately in the Victorian restoration, when much was well done, the original chancel arch of two orders, each decorated with "an arabesque figure of dark crimson colour", was removed and too large an arch substituted. In the north wall of the chancel two of the original small round headed slit windows remain, but on the south side there is a small oblong window just west of the chancel arch, inserted, it is suggested, to give light between the arch and the rood screen. East of this is a small doorway. Originally round headed, this was raised in 1863 by about a foot and given a pointed head. A Celtic cross is said to have formed a lintel above this. This no longer can be traced and evidently it was replaced by the recipient by a Victorian sandstone cross which now stands in a wall tomb. Between this doorway and the east wall of the chancel is a wide window of four lights with tracery above, probably of late mediaeval date. The east wall of the chancel is masked at present by a large memorial to a Victorian minister; above this is a bevel on the wall where it has been reduced in width to carry a ceiling support, and above this is a small window intended to light a loft.

Off the north wall of the nave immediately west of the chancel there opens a north aisle. The lower parts of the walls are old, but the whole was rebuilt in 1928 and finished with a barrel vault in squared rubble. Local landed families contributed very generously to the cost of this, partly because they were assured by the builder, for whom it was a labour of love, that this was "St. Kentigern's cell". It is more likely that it was a chantry chapel or "mortuary aisle" of late fifteenth or early sixteenth century date, but this opinion, understandably, is unpopular in the parish. In the east wall is part of the broken piscina which stood beside the altar. In the north wall are two curious stones inserted by the builder under the impression that one was an altarstone and the other a font, and in the west wall are tally markings incised on the stones. Despite its slightly bogus character this aisle has a charm of its own. It contains three mediaeval burial slabs, one showing an emblem for a miller, the second a rather grim representation of a man in armour, accurate in detail despite its grotesque character, and a third commemorating

a mediaeval vicar. This stone bears an inscription commemorating Mr Robert Vessy, formerly vicar of Stobo, who died on the 10th day of May in the year of our Lord 1473. It bears an incised design consisting of a chalice and a sunken panel with the letters IHS. This stone is of exactly the right size to fit the wall tomb in the chancel and may have formed part of it.

Much devoted care has been given to this church by lairds and ministers. The 1863 restoration, unfortunate in some respects, did much to preserve the building. More was done under the ministry of Dr. Cruickshank and, more recently, under the Revd. Ian Auld who was responsible for opening out and refurnishing the chancel which had been filled with pews until his time. The floor of the church slopes downwards from east and west towards the chancel arch. The pews in the nave have been stripped and waxed. Some, dating from 1863, show traces of woodworm, but the older pews, which enclosed the communion table area until 1863, show no trace of it. Good modern woodwork supports the laird's loft. The church is heated and lit by electricity, using the older brass lamps, six of which are of sixteenth century work while the rest are copies. The kirk is carpeted throughout in blue and the pews have blue mohair seating. On one of the jambs of the chancel arch is the seventeenth century pewter baptismal bowl in its original wrought iron bracket. A stone font, still in the kirk a century ago, is now missing, and may perhaps be the one in Dawyck Chapel. At the east end of the chancel behind the table is a hanging in blue damask with gold embroidery, and on a shelf above this are a brass almsdish, and two Flemish brass candlesticks. A modern brass cross with inset Scots pebbles is on the communion table. In the laird's loft is a very pleasing set of Regency chairs.

Quite a number of things might well be done to improve this little country kirk and when funds permit they will probably be done, but as it stands Stobo is one of the most attractive churches in the borders and its people are well aware of this. One of the problems of being minister of such an ancient church is the constant need to remember that it is not an antique or a museum piece but the home of a worshipping congregation. The great decline in population in modern times has brought other pressing problems. The parish of Dawyck was suppressed in the eighteenth century and divided between Stobo and Drumelzier. A Victorian church on its site is maintained by the laird of Dawyck and used at inter-

vals for services. Its silver, including two early seventeenth century chalices, and pewter are still used. Under the ministry of the Rev. Ian Auld, Stobo and Drumelzier were united and in the time of the present minister Tweedsmuir was linked to Stobo and Drumelzier. This restores the total parish to almost its early mediaeval extent and to a length of 27 miles. All three churches are in regular weekly use. The population, which reached a maximum of over 1200 in Victorian times, has now fallen to 374 and appears to be growing smaller as well as more elderly. The proportion of communicants is much higher than the national average as the total roll runs to just under 200 at present. Divided among three churches the attendance is often painfully small, especially on winter Sundays, but in 1966 the average combined attendance was 69 over the course of the year. Almost every household in the parish has some sort of friendly connection with the church, but small numbers and wide distances make active congregational life very limited. There are times when the minister feels that his position is not so much like that of the headmaster of a school as of the head of a correspondence college. Despite this, when figures can be traced, it is worth noting that the proportion of inhabitants who are communicants is much higher now than in Victorian times and there are indications that, when allowance is made for the smaller population, the same is true of the numbers present at weekly worship. Congregational giving is incomparably larger than in Victorian times and steadily rises.

Though this is an upland parish where the motorist can scarcely pass through without seeing a kestrel or sparrowhawk our nearness to Edinburgh may bring an increase of population before the close of this century. Meantime the position of Stobo, as of so many Border parishes, is a transitional one.

JAMES BULLOCH