

THE CHURCHES OF FREDERICK PILKINGTON

‘The wee kirk, the Free Kirk, the kirk wi’oot the steeple,
The Auld Kirk, the cauld kirk, the kirk wi’oot the people!’

The satirical couplet neatly sums up the state of Scottish ecclesiastical architecture in the decade following the Disruption of 1843. In the course of that decade there began a period of intense building activity; before the end of the century more than six hundred new churches were erected in Scotland, a great many of these for large Free Church congregations who soon found that the temporary accommodation into which they had moved at the Disruption was totally inadequate. They needed new buildings not only to cope with the growing numbers but also to boost the visual prestige of the Free Church. In his monumental book *The Church Architecture of Protestantism* (Edinburgh, 1934), Andrew Landale Drummond, the late minister the Eadie Church in Alva, has combined architectural enthusiasm with his theological learning to trace the results of the eighty-five-year division of the Scottish Church on the buildings in which its members worshipped. To Dr. Drummond also must be ascribed the credit for first noticing an ‘originality of the most bizarre variety . . . found in the works of a certain Mr. Pilkington’. Frederick Thomas Pilkington (1832–98) has often been ignored and underrated, frequently merely misunderstood, and yet he was perhaps the most original designer of churches which Scotland produced in the nineteenth century. That he should have flourished in Scotland is, like so many things about the man, a mystery, for he was born in Lincolnshire the son of a local architect who moved to Edinburgh in 1854. By this time Frederick had himself been trained as an architect, probably in London, and might have been expected to assist with his father’s practice. His time to do so must, however, have been limited for he enrolled at the University and spent four years studying mathematics. He seems to have been a capable student winning at least one prize, but, like the vast majority of his contemporaries, chose to complete his course without undergoing the tedious process of a ceremonial graduation. While Frederick studied, his father Thomas seems to have pursued a quiet practice, probably relying for his comforts at his not unfashionable home in Dundas Street on the proceeds from a relatively successful English practice and the sale of a family brickworks.

Why it may be wondered did the family move to Edinburgh at all? They were doing well in England, and ‘The Athens of the North’

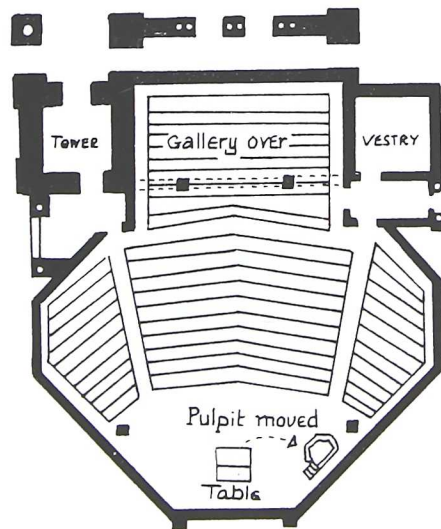


FIG. 1 SOUTH CHURCH, PENICUIK

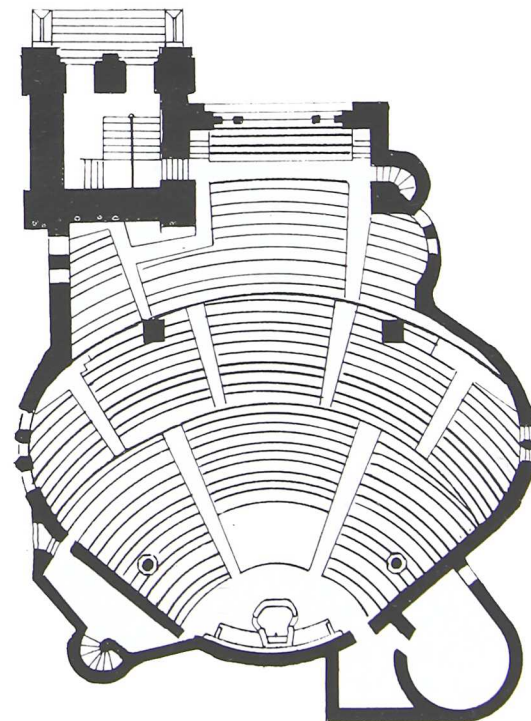


FIG. 2 BARCLAY CHURCH, EDINBURGH

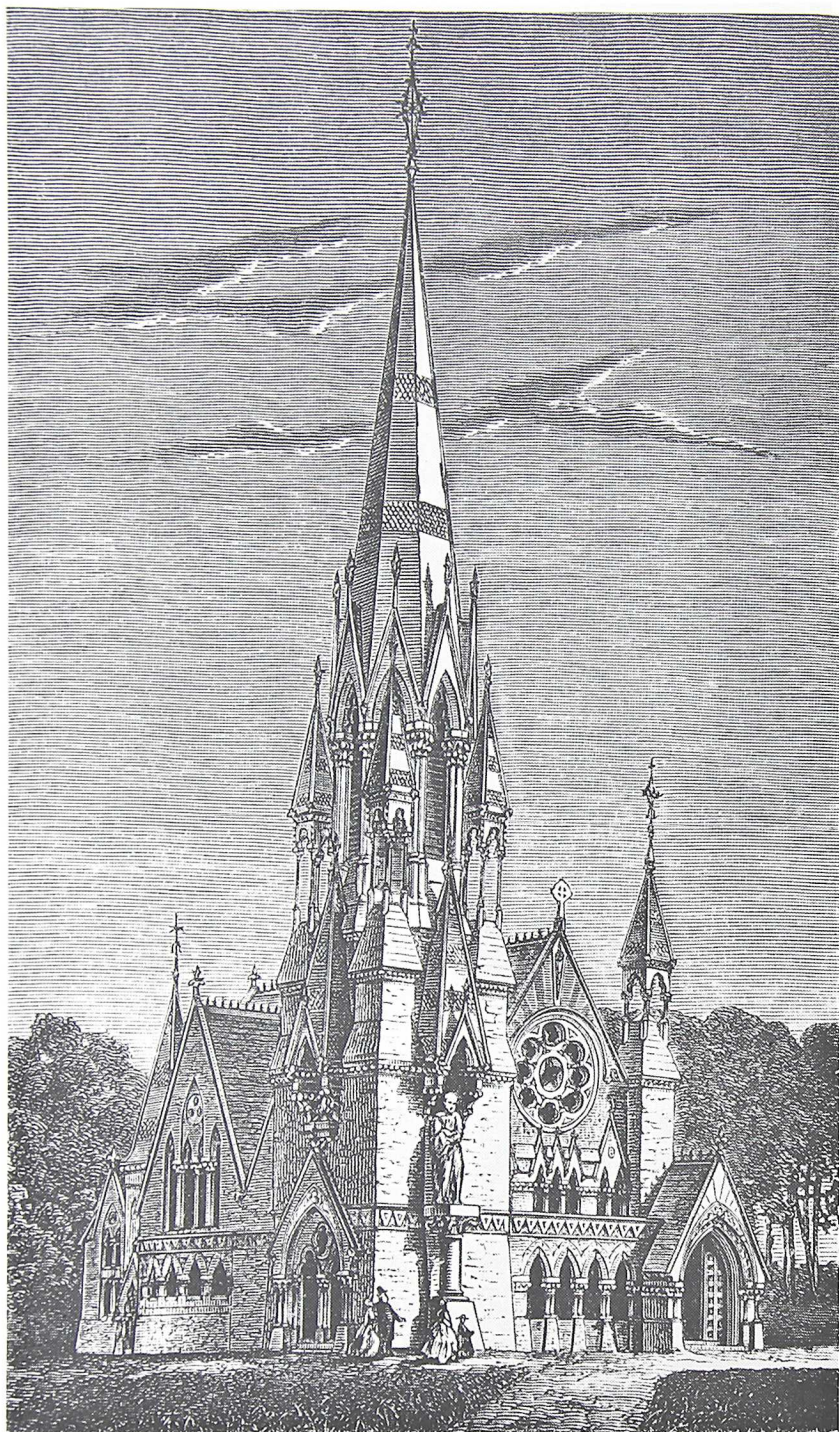


PLATE I BARCLAY CHURCH, EDINBURGH – from the original Watercolour by Robert Murray, 1870. (By Courtesy of Edinburgh Public Libraries)

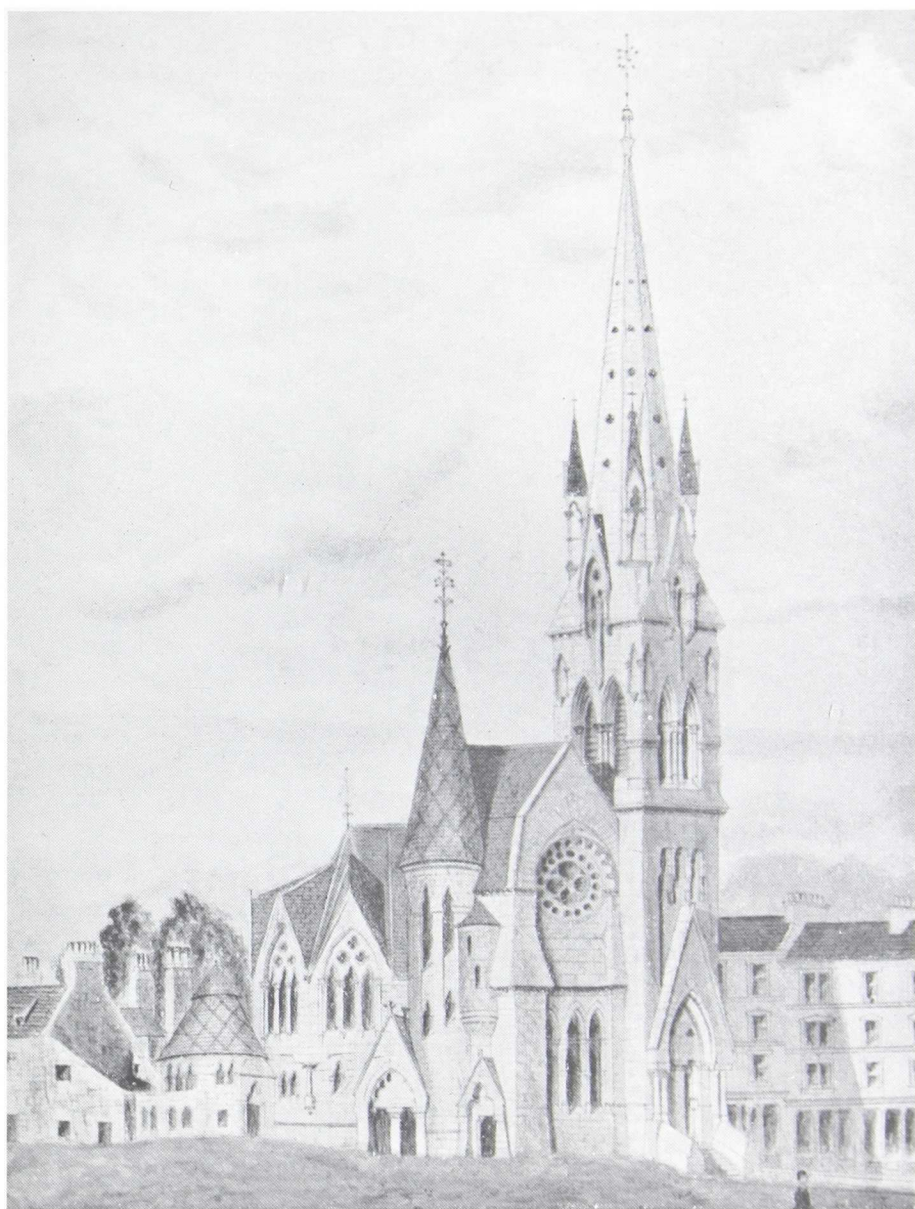


PLATE 2 (From Grant's *Old and New Edinburgh*)

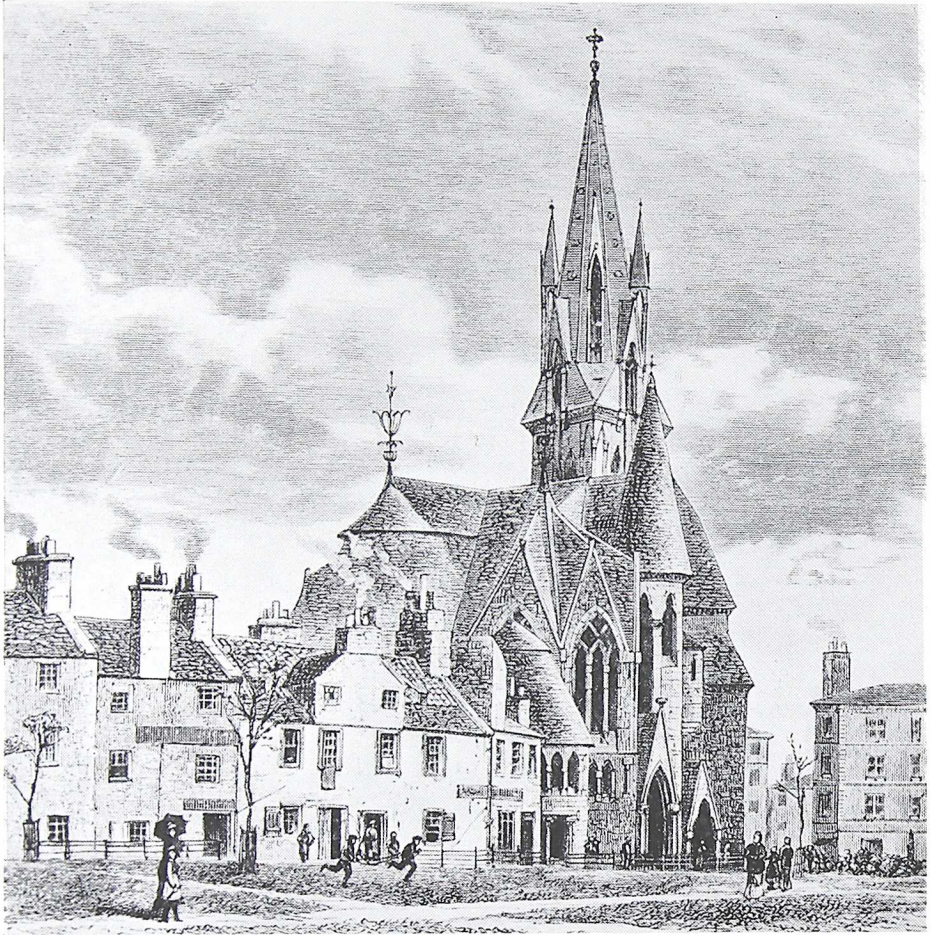


PLATE 3 MEMORIAL CHURCH DESIGN
(From Collet-Sandars' translation of Albert Rosengarten, *Die architektonischen Stylarten*
[1876])

with its wealth of native talent does not seem to have been the most promising place for the establishment of an outsider's architectural practice. But other factors must be considered. Jonathan Pilkington, Thomas's father, had been a minister and Thomas was himself an ardent Methodist whose zeal even extended to the destruction of such worldly documents as the family pedigree. From the output of his Lincolnshire practice it can be seen that his main interest was ecclesiastical architecture. The combination of these two facets of Thomas's character help to explain his move to Scotland; as a non-conformist he would have been aware of the disputes within the Scottish Church which had led to the Disruption, and which ten years later still claimed the energies of the factions. Moreover, with his church-designing ambitions, he might well have guessed that the halls and temporary buildings in which the Free Church congregations were worshipping would soon prove inadequate. If this was his reckoning, then he proved correct but in the outcome it was his son rather than himself who was to benefit. In the first thirteen years of his Edinburgh practice Frederick Pilkington designed as many churches each in his own characteristic style, and it is some tribute to their success and durability that only one of these has been demolished and one other is currently disused.

For ease of reference and to avoid bloating the text with descriptive repetitions the churches will be described in the form of a chronological catalogue. Nor is this particularly unfair to Pilkington about whom, apart from his professional commitments and the comments which they elicited in the press, very little is known. He married in 1858 and went to live in the fast-expanding and decorative suburb of Trinity but less than three years later his wife died in childbirth and he returned to the centre of the town. John Cowan, a friend of university days, suffered a similar bereavement at the same time and the pair spent some weeks travelling together on the Continent. On his return to Edinburgh Pilkington had immediate success in two church competitions and established a reputation for ecclesiastical design which he retained as long as he stayed in Scotland. He remarried and raised a family of five children, living successively in Cumin Place, Eton Terrace, Egremont House in Dick Place which he built for himself, and finally Carlton Terrace. His architectural output was, even in mid-Victorian terms, extensive and yet there seems to be little evidence to suggest that he conducted a large office. He worked with his father until the latter retired in 1863, and it was about the same time that he was joined by John Murray Bell (1839-77) in a partnership which lasted until this young man's early death. His work included many distinguished private houses of which survivors include The Kirna and Stoneyhill, both at Walkerburn, Peeblesshire, and Craigend Park (now Kingston

Clinic) at Liberton, Midlothian. He also designed a number of less successful public buildings, which have largely disappeared, but include the extraordinary Parkend flats (originally for single girls at the mill) across the bridge from his South Church in Penicuik, Midlothian, and the equally delightful block of shops at the corner of Fountainbridge and Grove Street in Edinburgh.

Pilkington is chiefly remembered however for his church designs. The origins of his style, being of less interest to the readers of this journal than Pilkington's planning ability, are best dismissed in a brief general comment. They are to be found in the Gothic revival movement which Scotland with its strong classical tradition adopted with greater caution and discretion than her southern neighbour. It was not until the publication of R. W. Billings's *Baronial and Ecclesiastical Antiquities of Scotland* (1852) that Scottish architects were made aware of their own important medieval heritage, and the possibility of adapting that heritage to modern use was not realized until the following year when John Ruskin delivered his celebrated *Edinburgh Lectures on Art and Architecture* (published 1854). Pilkington adhered closely to Ruskin's principals, and in the High Victorian tradition which they promoted he evolved a highly personal style by mixing northern medieval elements with those from the Gothic architecture of Northern Italy as published by Ruskin and George Edmund Street. Thus we find in his work the bracing polychrome stone, the chunky rustication and the lavish external carving of Venetian medieval buildings combined with French rose windows, decorated tracery, high-pitched roofs and deep, rain-conscious porches. The amalgam is a success because of Pilkington's skilful siting and attention to sculptural massing. At the Barclay Church on the Meadows in Edinburgh, for example, an extremely awkward location has been turned to advantage through the adept and unconventional manipulation of the constituent elements of the church. The great tower and spire act as a focus for a number of converging streets and dominate the busy activity of Tollcross, while the body of the church develops from this solid, square corner in an almost plastic progression round the limits of the irregular site, never merely following them but creating instead an interesting pattern, advancing and then recessed, straight and then curving, refinely carved and then crudely chiselled. This external variety is, of course, generated by the internal arrangements and it is this aspect of Pilkington's architecture which will receive most attention in the discussion of each church.

Moray Free Church, South Back of the Canongate, Edinburgh (1862)

Pilkington's friendship with John Cowan resulted in John's father, Charles Cowan, M.P., commissioning from him the designs for this

church and that at Penicuik, both for the Free Church of which the Cowans were prominent members. It is the only church by Pilkington which has been demolished (to make way for an extension to Moray House College), but we can tell from the ground plan and an indistinct view in Sulman's panoramic view of Edinburgh (1868) that it had a great deal in common with the Penicuik South Church. It had a smaller capacity, holding only 550 people. Designs for both churches were exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1862.

South Church, Penicuik, Midlothian (Fig. 1) (1862-3)

Here embodied in quite a small church (capacity 700) are the essential elements of Pilkington's early style. Following the customary arrangement of Presbyterian churches attention is concentrated on the bible and on the minister preaching from behind it. But instead of having the pulpit conventionally set in the middle of one side of a rectangle or at the joint of a 'T', or even in a regular curved plan, Pilkington places it in front of a large window in the wall at the south side of the site, focusses ranges of seating on it and then wraps walls and roofs about these, and finishes with a tower in the north-west corner of the site and a wall running parallel to the road creating an impressive front and a high gable to contain the gallery window. The resultant plan of the walls is complex, a rectangle attached to an irregular polygon, but the internal intention is clear and uncompromising, every seat faces towards the pulpit (or rather towards where the pulpit was intended to be; it has been moved off-centre in a well-intentioned but misguided attempt to give, presumably, greater prominence to the Lord's Table).

The carving especially on the exterior is extremely vigorous and attractive, incorporating in the manner of contemporary Irish sculptors animals and birds among the vegetable forms. The tower, square at the base and octagonal above, lacks its spire which is a pity because it was designed to incorporate this dominant corner feature.

Trinity Church, Irvine, Ayrshire (1861-3)

The design of this church was apparently much influenced by the minister, the celebrated poet-preacher, the Rev. William Bruce Robertson, to whom the congregation presented the church when it was opened on 29 December 1863. One of Pilkington's most complete and satisfactory buildings, it is superbly sited overlooking the main bridge in Irvine. Red, white and two shades of grey-brown stone were used and in this non-industrial situation have retained their brightness. Under-building on the steep south side of the site has effected an imposing façade towards the river. The interior, an expanded version of Penicuik, again concentrates attention on the

pulpit, now a great platform decorated with three reliefs separated by four statuettes of the evangelists all in Caen stone. The rather stiff academic feel of these pieces contrasts neatly, but not to their favour, with the natural decoration of the windows. Disused and at one time under threat of demolition, the church is now to be retained as the centrepiece for the new town of Irvine. (That such a building of very real architectural merit should have been abandoned in the first place, whatever the circumstances, is strange, but that it should be abandoned in favour of a far less distinguished structure which could have well been converted into a much needed church hall is to be wondered at.)

Trinity and Dudhope Crescent were the only two churches designed by Pilkington for United Presbyterian congregations.

The Barclay Church (now 'The Barclay-Bruntsfield Church') Bruntsfield, Edinburgh (Fig. 2, Plates 1 and 2) (1862-4)

The story of Pilkington's best church built from Miss Mary Barclay's bequest can be read in J. Brian Crossland's *Victorian Edinburgh* (1966). It is an expanded and sophisticated version of Trinity at Irvine, holding, when panels at the rear of the galleries are removed, almost 2,000 people. The walls of the church no longer pretend to be polygonal but have become a single wall flowing in irregular curves round the huge central space, above which an elaborate roof is supported on four massive piers. The seating is now arc-shaped and actually centred on the great pulpit, and this is raised in order to bring it in nearer contact with those in the low first gallery. In this subjection to one idea, that of focus on the Bible, Pilkington became perhaps too uncompromising in his pursuit of the modern standard that form should follow function. In any case he never again attempted anything so radical, though this may simply be indicative of the limits of his budget on other occasions. The spire of the Barclay reaches 250 feet which made it when built the tallest building in Scotland, and in Britain lower only than those on the cathedrals of Norwich and Salisbury. It was completed by mid-summer 1864 and to mark the occasion the colourful minister, the Rev. James Hood Wilson, insisted on conducting a dedication service from the highest scaffolding with wind blowing through his magnificent beard. He also presented, no doubt with elaborate modesty, a copy of his own book, *The Golden Fountain*, to Alexander Tod the clerk of works, suitably inscribed with dedication, date and even the exact hour of presentation. This piece of pastoral duty has had impressive results because that book is now in the possession of Alexander's grandson, Stewart Tod, the present architect in charge of the Barclay.

Auchengray Church, by Carnwath, Lanarkshire

A tidy little church with a west end enlarged in Pilkington's style perhaps at the same time as the Barclay was being erected, 1864-5.

United Presbyterian Church, Morebattle, Roxburghshire (1865)

Designed not by Frederick Pilkington but by his father, Thomas, while living in retirement in Kelso; the plan is a simple rectangle but the detail shows the influence of the son on the father. Unhappily a large concrete beam has been inserted unsympathetically into the gabled front and the church now does service as a coach garage.

St. John's Edenside, Kelso, Roxburghshire (1863-6)

This was the last church in which Pilkington used his distinctive polygonal plan. The exterior carving is more mechanical and less exhilarating than the earlier churches but the site, once again overlooking a river, is well used and the façade composition impressive. Frederick's father acted as clerk of works, and the church was built for another celebrated minister, the hymn writer, the Rev. Horatius Bonar, who unfortunately answered a call to Edinburgh before it was completed and never preached in it. The interior has been completely refitted.

Memorial Church Design (Plate 3) (1866)

Published in Collet-Sandars translation of Albert Rosengarten's *Die architektonischen Stylarten* (1876), this might well be the design which Pilkington exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1866. The scheme is used in a simplified form in Pilkington's two Dundee churches, St. Mark's and the McCheyne Memorial (see below).

Free Church, Innerleithen, Peeblesshire (c. 1867)

Designed by Pilkington for members of the Ballantine family for whom he had already erected two mansions. The chancel was rebuilt and the tower remodelled, but not by Pilkington, in 1878.

The New Presbyterian Church, Great Frederick Street, Cardiff (1867)

The only building designed by Pilkington outside Scotland during the middle years of his career, this church has a restricted site of plain rectangular shape and Pilkington was forced to design a more conventional church with a 'U'-shaped gallery, all placed on a basement containing the church halls, in the same arrangement as the Dundee churches.

St. Mark's, Greenfield, Dundee, Angus (1868)

Designed by Pilkington and John Murray Bell, this is the first of the two Dundee churches with the distinctive barrel-shaped projections

from the side walls which allow the ground-floor seating to sweep round into Pilkington's focus on the pulpit. Although much admired when first designed it is dull in comparison with the eccentricities of the earlier churches. It is discussed in D. M. Walker's *Architects and Architecture of Dundee* (1955).

McCheyne Memorial Church, Dundee, Angus (1868-71)

This competition-winning design is a second version of the St. Mark's scheme with a more elaborate interior, and a less interesting exterior profile. Like the Cardiff Church it has a 'U'-shaped gallery, and like St. Mark's a focussing ground floor. It was built in memory of the Rev. R. M. McCheyne and opened on 12 May 1871.

New Free Church, Viewforth (now Viewforth St. Oswald's) Edinburgh
(1871)

This design follows and develops the Dundee scheme by containing the entire sweep of the ground floor seating in a square plan rather than a rectangle with bulges. Above the gallery remains a 'U'-shape but is much deeper at the sides and curves boldly through the corners. Beneath the main tower, which although lacking its intended spire still reaches 120 feet, is a charmingly irregular curved staircase and banister. It is Pilkington's second largest church, having a capacity of 1,100.

New Parish Church, Lamlash, Arran (1871)

Designed by Pilkington for the Duke of Hamilton.

United Presbyterian Church, Dudhope Crescent, Dundee (1877)

Pilkington's last executed church which without a tower lacks external distinction. The interior is, however, not unimpressive. This, too, is discussed in D. M. Walker's *Architects and Architecture in Dundee* (1955).

Proposed New Church, Moffat, Dumfriesshire (1882)

Pilkington's last known ecclesiastical work was an unexecuted design; it was also the last drawing he exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy.

Pilkington's only other building with ecclesiastical connections was, rather surprisingly, the West End Theatre, for which he designed an interior to go with Sir James Gowans' façade. The building remained a theatre for only three years, but afterwards served for many decades as the United Presbyterian Synod Hall, a circumstance which must have given those of our more strict Victorian forebears a quiet chuckle or two.

When Pilkington finally left Scotland in 1884 to take up practice in London, where he eventually died in 1898, his eclecticism had already become unfashionable. Indeed his London work, brash and uninteresting as it is, suggests that he had himself forsaken the Gothic for an overblown, streaky-bacon-like classicism which he delivered in the over-scaled doses much loved by the late-Victorian world. The extent to which his earlier work was ridiculed at this time and for half a century after may be seen from a report published in *The British Architect* in 1888:

. . . Professor Blackie discoursed in 'The Philosophy of Architecture' . . . in a vein of rollicking humour he launched out into a running commentary on the architectural features of certain buildings in Edinburgh. . . . 'The Barclay Church – (laughter) – was the most disorderly building in the city. . . . It looked like a congregation of elephants, rhinoceroses, and hippopotamuses with their snouts in a manger and their posteriors turned to the golf players on the links' (loud laughter).

Since the publication of Dr. Drummond's book few architectural historians working in Scotland have failed to notice Pilkington's work, and it has been approached with increasing sympathy and interest. If Pilkington was not a great architect, it was because he did not have great opportunities, and if the importance of his contribution to Scotland's architecture be doubted, he must at least be respected as one of those architects who left a share of Free Churches neither wee nor wi'oot steeples.

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(For generous assistance of various kinds the author wishes to thank Mr. J. Brian Crossland, Mr. Thomas Davies, the staff of the Edinburgh Room at the Edinburgh Public Library, Dr. Alistair Rowan, and Mr. David Walker, Mr. Michael Stewart, and most especially, the many ministers and church officers whose patience and kindness have made this study possible.)

HUGH DIXON, Fellow of the Institute of Irish Studies,
The Queen's University of Belfast