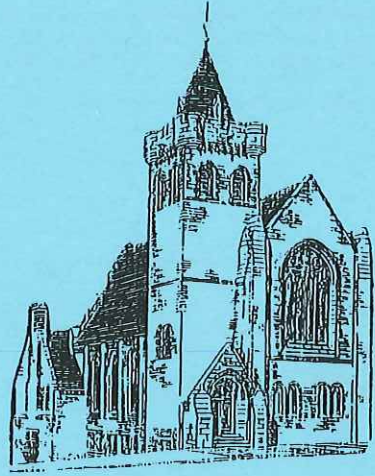


KIRK O' FIELD

A SHORT HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION OF ITS BUILDINGS



IN THE BEGINNING...

Kirk o' Field Parish Church, its suite of halls, and the offices of Lothian Health Board adjoin one another on the east side of the Pleasance, immediately south of its junction with Brown Street. It would be wrong to claim that these three buildings form any kind of architectural unity, yet they belong together in a very real sense, for together they constitute a lasting memorial to one of the greatest churchmen of the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Rev. Professor Archibald Hamilton Charteris. Although high ecclesiastical honours were heaped upon him -- Professor of Biblical Criticism in the University of Edinburgh, Dean of the Chapel Royal in Scotland, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1892 -- it is for his unremitting zeal for increasing the witness of the church at parish level that he best deserves to be remembered. As the initiator in 1869 of the influential Committee on Christian Life and Work of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, and as the one who over the next twenty-five years inspired so many of the developments it pioneered, Charteris' particular link with Kirk o' Field stems from his desire to enhance the place of women within the life of the church. This led to the formation in 1887 of the Woman's Guild and to the re-establishment in the following year of the Order of Deaconesses, the latter for women who were able to devote themselves full-time to church work and the former for those who could give only part-time service.

Suggestions for a 'Society of Deaconesses' first surfaced in the 1870s, but it was not until the late 1880s that the General Assembly was persuaded of the wisdom of appointing women to full-time church work, and in 1888 Lady Grisell Baillie was set apart as the first Deaconess. A Training Centre, 'Deaconess House' had been opened in November of the previous year in 33 Mayfield Gardens but this was moved to 27 George Square in 1888 when part of the Pleasance was

designated as a sphere of practical mission work for trainee deaconesses, the overcrowded tenements and slum conditions in the streets between the Pleasance and the Queen's Park suggesting that this would be an area rich in missionary challenge. Under the supervision of Miss Alice Maud Maxwell, meetings were held initially in private houses, and then in a rented shop close to where the church now stands, but the work proved so successful that more adequate premises were soon needed.

DEACONESS HOUSE

In August 1890 Professor Charteris and others petitioned Edinburgh Dean of Guild Court for a warrant 'to pull down the old tenements and other buildings at 140 Pleasance and erect on the ground Mission Buildings for the purpose of the Church of Scotland Deaconess Institution, consisting of a three-storey building containing reading room, coffee room, and classrooms with a hall behind'. In 1891 this 'commodious set of mission buildings', designed by Robert Wilson, was opened, now converted into a useful set of hall accommodation and small meeting-rooms.

The ground floor consisted of three rooms, a coffee-room with windows on to the street, a 'private room', as it is called on early plans, now converted into a kitchen, and a third room on the other side of the entrance which is no longer part of Kirk o' Field. At the rear of the buildings was the Mission Hall, now St Ninian's Hall, with one entrance for the congregation and another connecting it with the 'private room' for the leader of worship. On the first floor there was a room-and-kitchen flat, now the vestry and creche (hinges for a meat-safe can still be seen outside the window of the former kitchen), two classrooms (now knocked together into a comfortable lounge) and a bathroom (now a kitchen, but with the dado that surrounded the bath still in place). The top floor had five rooms (two of which have been brought together into one), originally living accommodation for the student deaconesses.

THE DEACONESS HOSPITAL

It was intended from the start that deaconesses were to combine nursing experience with the Christian witness and teaching of their ordinary mission work. Training in the larger infirmaries proved inconvenient, and so, nothing daunted, Charteris set about the business of building the Church's own hospital immediately to the south of Deaconess House. The Deaconess Hospital, a memorial to Lady Grisell Baillie, was opened in 1894, thought to be the first hospital in Britain maintained and staffed by a Protestant Church (an earlier venture of a similar kind by the Waldensian Church in Italy prevents the Deaconess Hospital from being regarded as a world first!). The hospital belonged officially to the Christian Life and Work Committee, whose Vice-Convener, Lord Polwarth (who happened to be Lady Grisell Baillie's brother-in-law), presided at the opening ceremony on 11 October 1894, when the Moderator of the General Assembly, the Rt Rev. Professor R.H. Story, accepted the building on behalf of the Church. The motto 'Christo in Pauperibus' ('To Christ among His Poor') is prominently displayed above the front door. The hospital had its own private access from Deaconess House, the interconnecting door still in place.

Under the capable direction of its first matron, Miss Ella Pirrie, one of the earliest Deaconesses, the hospital opened with just twenty-four beds, but so quickly did it make its mark in the district that it was extended in 1897 and again in 1912, allowing it to take up to fifty patients. A further major extension took place in 1936, the new building being opened on 1 December by the Duke and Duchess of York in one of their last public duties before ascending the throne as King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. There were now ninety-two beds, a maternity ward, a children's ward and an operating theatre, and the hospital was able to offer a complete training to young women of the Church who wished to take up nursing as a career. In 1947 the Deaconess Hospital ceased to be run by the Church of Scotland and passed into the hands of the National Health Service -- with the adjacent ground-floor room of Deaconess House also becoming NHS property at this time -- but it continued to have close links with the church until its closure in the early 1990s, when the buildings were converted into offices for Lothian Health Board.

THE CHURCH

The area within which the deaconesses' mission work was carried out was formally in the parish of St Cuthbert's, and the minister of that parish was responsible for any ministerial ordinances that were required, such as dispensing the sacraments of baptism and communion. These responsibilities grew to such an extent that a separate minister was soon needed, and in 1895 the Rev. David Vipont was ordained as an Assistant Minister of St Cuthbert's for work within the St Ninian's Mission. He moved to Townhill, near Dunfermline, in 1904 and was succeeded by the Rev. William Cowan. Church life was growing steadily and by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century it was clear that the third element in Charteris's vision for the area, a proper church building, could not be long delayed, 'to complete the equipment of the St Ninian's Mission as a training centre for workers proposing to devote their lives to the service of the Church, to provide Church accommodation for the population of a densely crowded district, and to bring the Gospel message to those who, unless it were brought to their very doors, would never seek it for themselves' (Woman's Guild Life and Work, July 1911).

Accordingly, the site immediately to the north of Deaconess House, at the corner of the Pleasance and Brown Street, was acquired, the existing buildings were demolished, and on 1 June 1911 the Foundation Stone of the church was duly laid with full honours by the Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly, Lord Glenconner. Professor Charteris had died in 1908 and it had been decided to name the new church 'Charteris Memorial' 'as an enduring memorial of an honoured servant of God and an abiding testimony of the Church's appreciation of the lifelong labours of one through whose ability and devotion the life and work of the church had been greatly enriched' (ibid.). Professor Charteris's widow, then Honorary President of the Woman's Guild, participated in the ceremony by placing corn on the foundation stone, while the President of the Woman's Guild and the Matron of the Deaconess Hospital added the customary wine and oil.

Less than a year later, on 24 May 1912, the church was opened for worship and dedicated by the Moderator of the General Assembly, the Rt Rev. S. Marcus Dill. Mr Cowan continued as minister, his formal position remaining that of an Assistant Minister of St Cuthbert's, Charteris Memorial being technically a Mission Church in that parish. This situation lasted until 1934, when the General Assembly, in response to a petition from the Presbytery of Edinburgh, passed an Act which in effect made Charteris Memorial an ordinary parish church.

On three occasions since then, unions with neighbouring congregations have taken place: Charteris Memorial and Pleasance united in 1953 under the name of Charteris Pleasance, a triple union of Buccleuch, Charteris Pleasance and Nicolson Street took place in 1969 when the new name of Kirk o' Field was adopted, and finally in 1984 the congregations of Kirk o' Field and St Paul's Newington united to form the present congregation. The new name recalls one of the earliest religious buildings in this part of Edinburgh, the Collegiate Church of St Mary-in-the-Fields, or Kirk o' Field, a dependency of the Abbey of Holyroodhouse, whose tall tower dominated the area from at least the thirteenth century until it was demolished in the middle of the sixteenth century to make way for the Old College of the University of Edinburgh: it was in the mansion of the Provost of Kirk o' Field that Mary Queen of Scots' husband Henry Darnley was murdered in 1567.

The church is a striking addition to the Pleasance townscape, particularly when viewed from the north. The architect of the building, described in the Edinburgh volume of 'The Buildings of Scotland' series as Late Scots Gothic, was James B. Dunn. The tower at the north-west corner has a corbelled and battlemented parapet, with a red-tiled spire above. Below the church, with entrances from Brown Street, are a house for the Church Officer and a large hall, originally known as the Brown Street Hall but renamed the 'Harry Miller Hall' after the 1953 union in memory of the much-loved minister of the Pleasance Church who served first as Warden of New College Settlement from 1908 and then as minister of Pleasance UF Church until 1927.

Two doors from the street lead into a small vestibule, whose ceiling, adorned with what the authors of 'The Buildings of Scotland' describe as a 'Lorimerian vine enrichment', is one of the church's most attractive features. Grouped here are war memorial plaques from the congregations of Buccleuch, Charteris Memorial, Pleasance and St Paul's Newington, together with the communion table from Nicolson Street, with its symbolic figures representing Fortitude and the Church. From the vestibule stairs lead up to the gallery of the church, down to the Harry Miller Hall, and through to the coffee room of the former Deaconess House.

The church itself is fairly plain, with a wagon-roofed nave and a small west gallery. A one-manual pipe organ was installed in 1975. The pulpit-fall, designed by Joan Milroy, combines the cross of St Ninian with the letters 'DCS' (Deaconess of the Church of Scotland). On the back wall of the church is a memorial tablet to Professor Charteris, paying tribute to him as one who 'enriched the life of the Church of Scotland and increased the range and power of its work': the low-relief bust was sculpted by P.M.C. Archibald and cast by Montacutelli Bros., Paris. Balancing it on the other side of the church is the Roll of Honour of the Order of Deaconesses, recording the names of the 'Brown Deaconesses' (so-called from the colour of their uniforms) who were commissioned prior to the union of the Church of Scotland with the United Free Church in 1929. Three bronze tablets on the side walls of the church keep alive the memory of the Rev. William Cowan, the first minister, Miss Alice Maxwell, DCS, Superintendent of Deaconess House from 1888 to 1912, and Miss Ella Pirrie, DCS, Matron of the Deaconess Hospital from 1894 to 1914.

The plain wooden cross on the wall beside the pulpit needs no comment. The Church may no longer be involved in healing the sick in the hospital next door, but as it reaches out to the parish around it the gospel is still preached and people's lives are still touched by the living Christ.