

Biggar—S. Mary's

BIGGAR, S. MARY'S, was founded in 1545-46, by Malcolm, Lord Fleming, of Boghall Castle, Lord High Chamberlain of Scotland, and father of Mary Fleming, the close companion of Mary Queen of Scots. It was the last of the Collegiate Churches in Scotland. These, some 40 in all, were a distinctive group with a special function, and were born out of the medieval belief that the souls of the departed would have their time in Purgatory shortened through the prayers of the faithful on earth.

Soul masses were common in the abbeys and monasteries, but sometimes powerful families endowed priests to offer these masses at the altar in their own parish kirks. These were known as Chantries, and out of them came the Collegiate Churches. Sometimes they were new erections, but often were the old parish kirk transformed or rebuilt, and given College status.

Biggar is a fair example of the lines on which they were constituted. It was staffed by a "collegium" or community, of eight secular clergy or prebendaries, under a dean or provost, who were associated and endowed to maintain "continuity and perpetuity of soul masses and prayers". They had a common table, a common purse,—apart from individual revenues—to be used in the upkeep of furnishings, and the right of meeting weekly in Chapter for discipline and administration. Provision was also made for the maintenance and training of four choir boys, and for the upkeep of six poor old men.

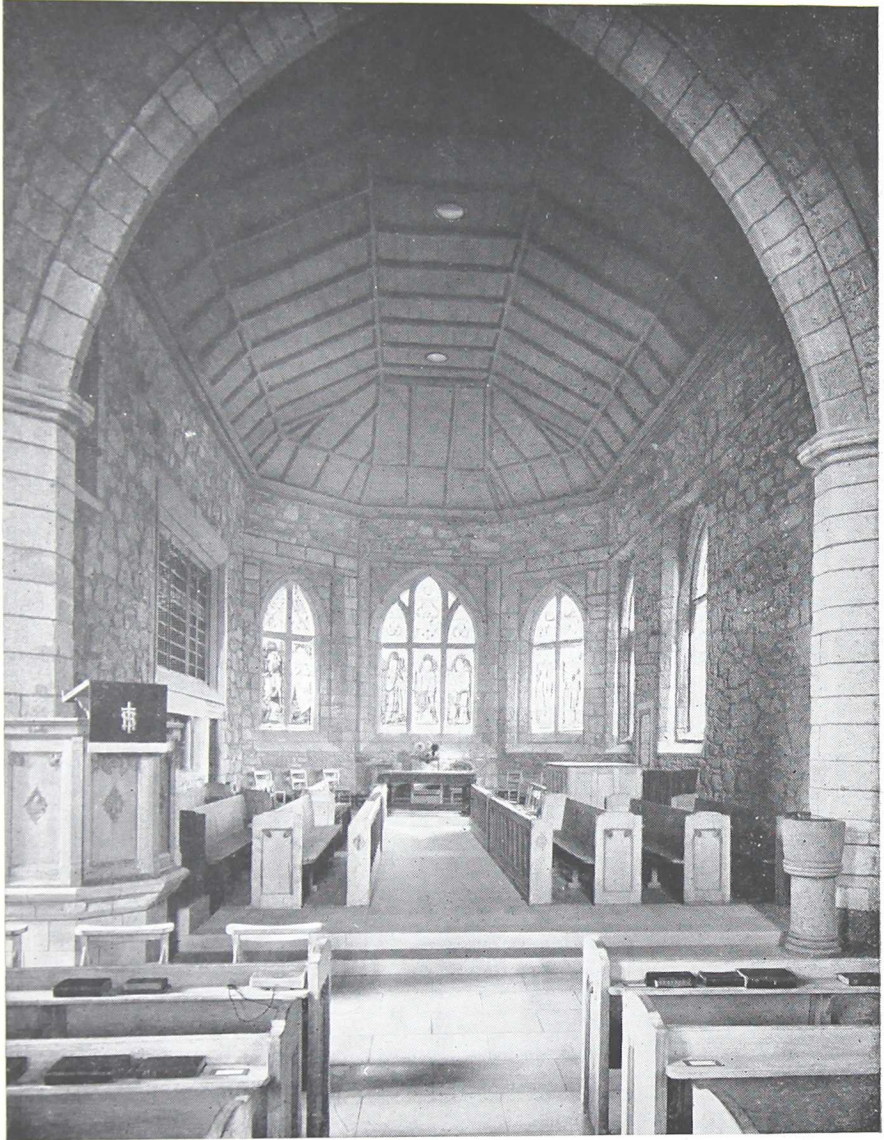
The corporate life of the College was regulated by the statutes prescribed by the founder in the Foundation Charter of January 16th, 1545-46.

This Charter, which is addressed to Cardinal Beaton, declares the function of the College to be the provision of masses for the souls of the founder and his family, and not the cure of the souls of the parishioners.

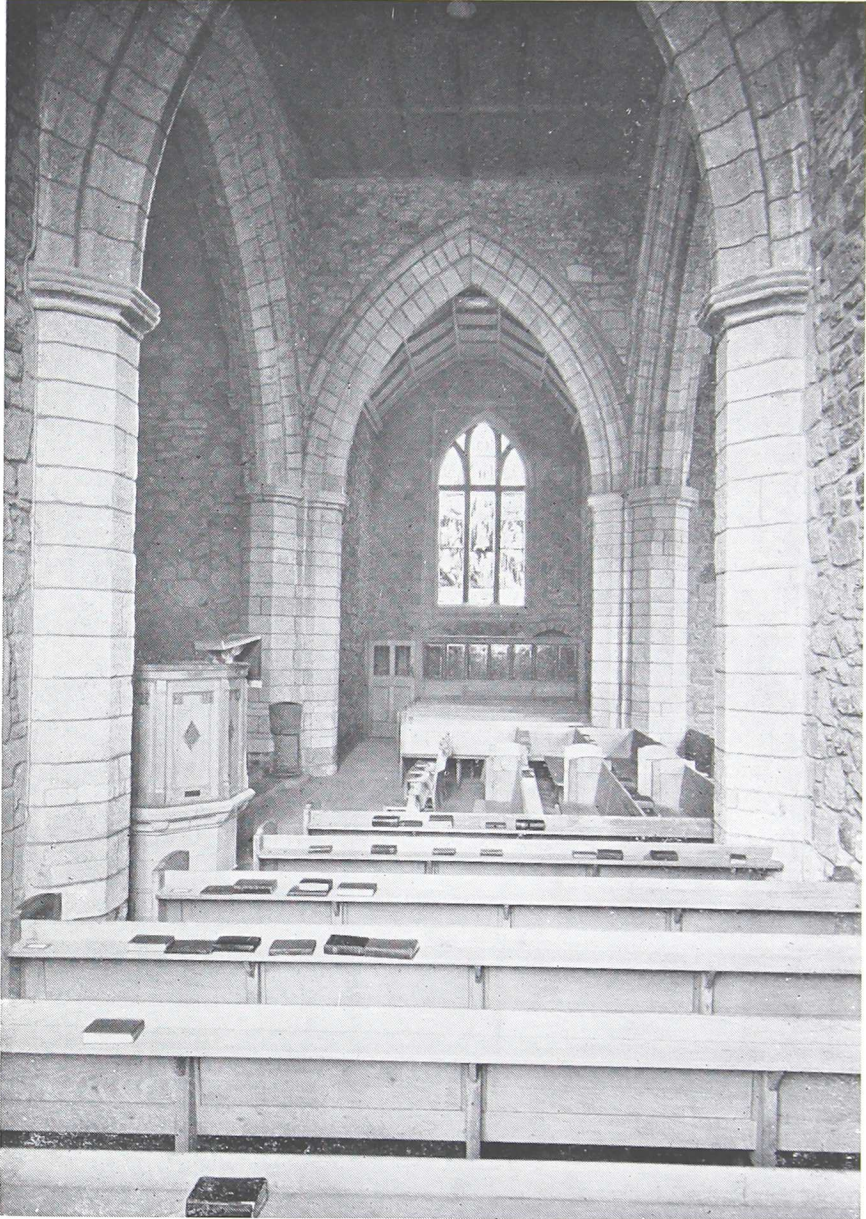
The prebendaries had their various duties in line with the main purpose of the College. One prebendary taught the choir boys music, and a little Latin, chiefly that they might sing in the services with understanding and decorum. Another saw that the poor old men received their food and



BIGGAR—S. MARY'S.



BIGGAR—S. MARY'S: CHANCEL AND APSE.



BIGGAR—S. MARY'S: THE TRANSEPTS.



BIGGAR—S. MARY'S: NORMAN DOOR: SOUTH TRANSEPT.

woollen cloaks, and that they sat daily at prayer around the founder's tomb.

As this College replaced the former parish kirk, it did have parochial responsibilities. Accordingly a nave was added for the use of the parishioners—the only part they were allowed to enter—and the eighth prebendary was given “the cure of souls”, but was also expected to take his full share in the votive masses and services.

The building of the College began in 1546. The parish church, of the 12th century, was pulled down, but its stones were used in the present building, as the recent restoration has disclosed. Malcolm, Lord Fleming, saw his College, *i.e.*, the chancel, apse, transepts and tower, well on the way to completion, but he was killed at the battle of Pinkie in 1547, and the first solemn service in the College was for the “erding” of the founder's body.

His son James, Lord Fleming, continued the building, adding the nave in a somewhat rougher style, but even by 1558 the tomb of the founder had not been built, and never was.

Did the College ever function? Some posts were undoubtedly filled. John Stevenson, apostolic prothonotary and precentor of Glasgow Cathedral, was appointed provost in 1545, actually before the church was built, and there are records also of a few prebendaries. So the College may have functioned in part, or even in full, for a brief period, but the Reformation of 1560 brought it, of course, to an end.

It would appear that a few of the prebendaries came over to the Reformed Church and acted as “readers” in Biggar, and it was not till 1574 that the first regular minister was appointed. In 1644 the kirk became the seat of the newly erected Presbytery of Biggar, and a few years later it saw within its walls the trial of a witch. In 1659 Alexander Peden, the famous Covenanter, preached in the kirk on Coloss. 2, 12, and was licensed by the Presbytery, while in 1662 its own minister, Alexander Livingstone, was “outed”, as were all the ministers of the Presbytery of Biggar. For some years afterwards the kirk was served by “calf skin curates”, the last of whom was “rabbed” by the parishioners in 1688.

In 1751 these robust parishioners of Biggar resolutely refused to accept as minister the nominee of the patrons. Out of 125 householders all were against “except the exciseman”, and finally the presentee withdrew. They were not so successful in 1780, when they again opposed the settlement of a minister, and his intrusion led to the

secession of several members. This was the last of any troubles under Patronage. Subsequent settlements were quite harmonious, and even at the Disruption of 1843 minister and congregation stood solid by the Established Church.

Around 1865, however, the even tenor of the services was greatly disturbed by a certain lady who persisted in singing the psalms in her own peculiar way, in a strong raucous voice "to the confusion of the congregation". Petitions to the session, and rebukes by the session, were without avail, and the lady continued to sing to her own delight and their despair. Two policemen were ultimately stationed at the kirk door to keep the lady out, but, when they disappeared after a Sunday or so, the lady returned and sang "with more than her usual determination", and the police had to be brought back for many Sundays to preserve peace in Biggar Kirk.

THE FABRIC.

The character of the church is medieval, but the building is essentially Scottish, with revivals and survivals of earlier styles in it, so that the term "Scottish Gothic" suits it well. It is cruciform in plan, with a long narrow chancel—37 feet long by 21 feet wide—ending in a three-sided apse. This type of apse is found in several of the College Kirks and possibly shows the influence of the "Auld Alliance" with France.

Apsé and chancel are well lighted with five windows—three in the apse and two in the south wall of the chancel—of unusual design in that they are set in rectangular frames, and the tracery of four of them is a simple cross.

The transepts—18 feet 8 inches by 14 feet 6 inches—are each lit by a large window set high in the end wall. In the south transept is the main door into the College. It is of early Norman design, a charming style often combined in Scotland with late Gothic. Inside is a stoup, and holes to receive the beam that barred the door; on the wall outside are the remains of the iron joughs.

Above the crossing is a squat and solid looking tower with battlements, which, with the crow-step gable of the nave, strike a typically Scottish note. It is carried on four fine fluted arches, well proportioned and designed. The hood moulds end in corbels with foliated carving. A wheel stair in the tower leads to a room above the crossing and to a doorway leading through the north wall of the chancel to

the rood loft. This loft, where Lord Fleming is reputed to have installed an organ, ran across the front of the chancel, with the rood screen underneath.

The roof was originally of open oaken beams and is said to have been enriched, above the chancel, with banners and gilding.

A small chapter-house on the north wall of the chancel completed the actual College.

The whole is built of dressed stone with little ornamentation beyond the corbels, the fluting of the arches, bottle mouldings on the doorways, and, on the outside, a string course. The building is supported with nicely designed buttresses with a broad water table on top.

The nave—56 feet long by 21 feet wide—was added a year or two later. It was hurriedly and roughly built of whinstone and is 18 inches off the true axis. Its darkness was illumined by a meagre rectangular window or two in the south wall. The entrance was through an arched doorway in the west wall, while there was also a door and porch at the south-west.

How did the fabric fare through the passing years ?

At the Reformation the influence of the Flemings saved the building from damage, but later days were not so kind.

No repairs are recorded till 1699, when "the kirk was in no good case" and some work was undertaken. In 1730 "the ruinous state of the roof" was made good with sarking and slates, and a small window was opened in the nave to relieve the darkness. In 1746 there was a "Division of the Kirk", *i.e.*, an allocation of space to the heritors. Part of the nave was marked out for tables for Holy Communion; the pulpit was set on the side wall of the chancel, with the precentor's seat in front, and the Fleming burial ground behind. In 1758, as the kirk "was going daily into decay", the walls were pinned and harled inside and out, the windows "glazed to the window soles"; a new window opened in the north wall of the nave, the pulpit moved to the centre of the chancel, and the roof over the crossing repaired.

Unfortunately the original chapter house and porch were both pulled down to provide material for the repairs in the main building.

Francis Grose, the English antiquarian, visited Biggar in 1789 and thought the kirk "a handsome building", but in fact it was so open to the winds and so cold that only the strong could attend. Accordingly the windows were now blocked up to six feet of daylight, a lath and plaster ceiling

inserted, the walls given two coats of plaster, and the length of the nave reduced by a division wall. Two years later the walls were re-pointed and the interior was whitewashed. A gallery on the division wall in the nave was added in 1833, and nave and transepts were reseated.

Cold and damp, however, continued, and in 1867, David Bryce, architect in Edinburgh, reported that the condition of the kirk was deplorable—walls unlathed, clay floor below ground level, plaster fallen from ceiling, sarking decayed, slates missing. This report led in 1870 to a complete repair. The foundations were cleared, the floor asphalted and laid with wood. The walls were pointed, and were lathed and plastered inside, and the stone of the windows, piers and arches was coated with cement. The present semi-barrel roof of wood was erected, and the windows in the nave re-designed like those in the chancel. New seating was installed, and a session house, with a library room above, was furnished behind the division wall in the nave; and a stove and gaslight were introduced. A porch and chapter house were once again built, following the wall line of the originals, and a belfry was added to the tower.

This thorough work saved the building, but it obliterated the original features and produced a very dull, if comfortable interior. In 1889 an organ was added in a gallery in the north transept, the window being lowered some five feet to give light underneath, and a hot water heating system was installed.

The kirk was brought into its present condition in 1935-6. Cleaning and repainting had become urgent, and out of that grew the idea of "restoration". Other churches were visited, and restoration work examined, and the possibilities in Biggar became evident.

The key question was the condition of the walls, so one day the minister and two elders evaded the jealous eye of the beadle and attacked the walls and windows of the apse with hammer and chisel. An enraged beadle caught them surrounded by dust and debris, but the stone work was found to be in very fair condition.

The next step was to "discover" the original building. Gradually the plaster was removed, the cement chipped from the stone work of windows, piers, and arches; galleries and division walls taken down; flooring and heating system lifted. This brought forgotten features to light, *i.e.*, the true proportions of the interior, the original mouldings of arches and doorways, the stoup and grooves at the south

door, the doorway to the rood-loft, and the socket holes in the chancel piers for the beams supporting the loft, thus determining the position of the rood loft and screen. Also there was found, high up in the south transept, a piscina with 12th century carving, evidence that stones from the 12th century church were used in the present building. This piscina is now at the south side of the apse. No trace of medieval colour wash was discovered, which perhaps indicates the haste with which the church was completed before the oncoming Reformation.

The way was now clear for the work of reconstruction. No cut and dried plan was made, but the building itself dictated what could be done. Every effort was made to keep visible any original or interesting feature, and the keynote was "simplicity".

First, the walls were deeply pointed, bringing out their rugged character. Then the nave and transepts were re-floored at the old level, but two shallow steps were made leading to the chancel floor and a third step led into the apse, which was now laid in York stone. A gallery, being necessary, was built at the west end of the nave, still leaving visible the full length of the building; and below it were session house, vestibule and screen. The kirk was now re-seated with pews of specially treated Scots oak, simple in design and rather low, to retain a sense of space. The organ, enlarged and rebuilt, was placed in the chapter house, and sounds into the church through a grille in the chancel wall. While making this opening the masons found a stone lamp and other worked stones that once belonged to the 12th century building. A new pulpit was erected at the north front of the chancel, and on the opposite side was set up a stone font, retrieved from a garden in the town. Finally, new heating and shadowless electric lighting were installed, and all necessary repairs done to tower and roof.

Much of the work was completed by local tradesmen who took a real interest in it, and it was perhaps fortunate that the architect was a member of session, and he and the restoration committee were contented to let plans grow gradually as the kirk itself seemed to dictate.

There is not much ornamentation about the work, simple lines being always the keynote; but the restoration has perhaps been not unsuccessful in bringing an old kirk to life again, and in catching something of the feeling of age and of peace that is the heritage of the centuries.

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