

## **The Parish Church of St. Cuthbert, Saltcoats**

THE present Parish Church of St. Cuthbert, Saltcoats (formerly Ardrossan Parish Church), is the fourth building to serve the parish, the first having been built on the Castle Hill, Ardrossan, *circa* 1230 A.D., where its foundations were excavated and laid bare at the beginning of the present century. This ancient building served as the place of worship for the parish until 1695, when it was blown down by a storm. The second church was built in a more sheltered site about a mile distant, but, in 1744, was taken down and rebuilt in the town of Saltcoats. This building, in use until 1908, still stands, a plain solid structure amid the tombstones of past generations.

The new church, completed in 1908, to plans prepared by the late Dr. McGregor Chalmers, is constructed of a beautiful dove-grey stone, and is Norman in design. The Norman Tower above the south-west doorway, 100 feet in height and over 17 feet square, contains a belfry with twin arched apertures on each of the four faces, and is surmounted by an ornamental balustrade. The west front, with its large three-light window, is flanked by two finely chiselled, Norman-arched doorways. On each of the north and south walls are four twin-light aisle windows, and four single clerestory windows. The roof is high, of fairly steep pitch, and on three levels, each marked by a stone cross, and descending from the nave to the chancel, and thence to the sanctuary. There are no transepts.

Three stone pillars, 7 feet in circumference and 13 feet apart, divide on each side the nave from the aisles, each of the columns having capitals with an individual decorative moulding. The total length of the interior is 104 feet; the breadth 64 feet. Carved on the stone walls at eight different places are Scripture texts, suitably chosen with reference to their position in the church; and several stones have decorative crosses.

There is a west gallery, and, unfortunately, a side gallery above the north aisle. The latter, I expect, was necessitated by the requirement in an old parish church to secure a sufficiency of sittings for heritors and their tenants. The effect, however, was to provide 1,200 sittings for a con-



*Photograph by R. V. Brown, Saltcoats.*

ST. CUTHBERT'S PARISH CHURCH, SALTCOATS.



*Photograph by R. V. Brown, Saltcoats.*

ST. CUTHBERT'S PARISH CHURCH, SALTCOATS.  
(Nave and Chancel, looking eastward).



*Photograph by R. V. Broen, Saltcoats.*

ST. CUTHBERT'S PARISH CHURCH, SALTCOATS.  
(The Chancel).



*Photograph by R. V. Brown, Saltcoats.*

ST. CUTHBERT'S PARISH CHURCH, SALTCOATS.  
(Pulpit, Organ and Choir Stalls).

gregation that has only now, for the first time in the century, reached a membership of slightly over 900. The side gallery could quite well have been dispensed with, and the architectural symmetry and beauty of the church thereby enhanced. From the roof, near the west gallery, hangs the model of a frigate of 50 guns, the "San Joseef", which was captured from the Spanish in 1797, and on which Lord Nelson received the swords of the officers of the captured squadron. The model was the work of a local gunner's mate, William Dunlop, who had a narrow escape from death by a shot which passed over him while he was lying in his hammock. He gifted the model as a thanksgiving to the parish church in 1804, where it has hung ever since.

Beneath a lofty Norman arch, with a span of 26 feet, two steps lead to the chancel, which is 17 feet in depth. The organ, a three-manual Hilsdon, is contained in an organ chamber on the south side of the chancel. The choir stalls of waxed oak are finely carved. Similar ornamentation is carried out on the square oak pulpit, which is situated on the south side of the chancel steps, thus effectively screening organ and organist.

On the north side of the chancel steps are the lectern and baptismal font. The original lectern was of oak, designed and carved in keeping with the furnishings mentioned above. Before my ministry, it was replaced, unfortunately I think, by one of brass, the book-board being an eagle with outspread wings. The baptismal font is of stone, with a silver basin of unknown age and interesting history. It was dug up in a field in Ardrossan, the site of the second church. The field was then the property of Laird Weir of Kirkhall, whose niece presented the long lost basin to the church. She had its rim inscribed as follows :—

" Baptismal Bowl, used at Ardrossan Parish Church, Stanley, near Kirkhall; Long lost, and restored by Miss Meikle, niece of Laird Weir of Kirkhall; May 23rd, 1903 ".

As the church at Kirkhall was taken down and rebuilt in Saltcoats in 1744, the basin must be at least 200 years old, and may well be considerably older.

Three steps, flanked by two wrought iron, seven-light candelabra, lead from the chancel to the sanctuary, which is 14 feet in depth. The Communion Table is thus very considerably elevated above the level of the nave, and is situated very close to the west wall. Set on a stone dais, it is fashioned of oak, and reproduces the same decorative scheme as the choir stalls and pulpit.

Above it, sunk in the east wall, is a reredos in white alabaster of the Lord's Supper. The arrangement of the disciples on either side of our Lord at the long table is similar to that in the famous Da Vinci painting, with the exception that three of the disciples (one of them obviously Judas, sitting with head bent and clasping a money bag in his hand), are seated sideways in front of the table. It is a chaste piece of work, a replica, I understand, of a reredos gifted by King Edward to a church in the Isle of Wight, in memory of Queen Victoria. The original was much admired by my predecessor, the Rev. D. D. Rees, who obtained the royal permission to have it copied, and presented it to the church. At first it rather outraged the Presbyterian conscience of the good folk of Saltcoats, but now, I am happy to say, it is prized as one of the most beautiful adornments of the church. Above the reredos rises the triple light east window, which is typical of the stained glass of the period in which the church was built, when artists were breaking with the Victorian practice of painting on glass, treating the medium very much like a canvas, and were reverting to the medieval art of building up stained glass, with the lead an integral part of the window. The centre panel shows the Ascended Christ as King, robed in scarlet and replete with orb and sceptre. The lower half of the panel is the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. Figures of St. Peter and St. Luke form the two side panels. There is a considerable amount of white glass, no doubt to afford as much light as possible to the chancel; and there is an excessive amount of the gold stain that was a common feature in windows at the beginning of the century. The figures are somewhat stereotyped, and the faces rather characterless.

Within the past two years, the church has been greatly enhanced by a scheme of stained glass windows carried out in the south and north aisles, by Mr William Wilson, R.S.A., R.S.W., of Edinburgh. The subject of the scheme is the Life of Christ, in fifteen representative scenes; and it has been so reverently, imaginatively, and originally treated, that in the opinion of those competent to judge, who have visited the church to view the windows, the work definitely establishes Mr Wilson in the front rank of British stained glass artists.

The scheme is as follows:—

### South Aisle.

1. The Adoration of the Magi. In the one panel, the Virgin Mother, robed in pale blue, is seated with the Infant Jesus on her knee. Joseph stands behind her, holding a lamp. In the other panel are the Magi, carrying their gifts in chaste caskets. The artist has followed tradition by making one of them dark-skinned.

2. (a) Jesus as a boy in the Temple, discoursing with the doctors. Inset above, Joseph and Mary are seen entering the Temple in search of the Child.

(b) The Baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan.

3. (a) The Good Samaritan.

(b) Jesus calling the children unto Him.

4. (a) The Raising of Jairus's Daughter. This is one of the most beautiful panels in the whole scheme. The composition is cleverly conceived; each of the four faces is a study in individual expression—that of Jairus showing startled bewilderment; that of the mother, the strain of sleepless vigil; that of the child, bemused wonder; that of Jesus, a mingled tenderness and authority. The colour scheme is exceedingly rich.

(b) The Stilling of the Tempest. The subject was chosen because of Saltcoats' association with the sea. The whole picture is vividly alive and tense.

The colour tones in these windows in the south aisle have been kept generally subdued, in order to leave the deeper reds, blues, purples, and greens for the Passion windows in the north aisle.

### North Aisle.

5. (a) Christ in Gethsemane. This, and the accompanying panel, are a blaze of rich, tense colour, and dramatically impressive in their whole conception.

(b) This panel shows our Lord with hands bound, His head encircled with thorns, and three figures worshipping Him in grotesque mockery.

6. (a) Via Dolorosa. Our Lord, stumbling beneath the burden of His Cross, turns to look at the Virgin Mother who follows Him.

(b) The Crucifixion. The stark realism of the Passion windows reaches its climax here. There is nothing in these panels of the maudlin sentiment that so often disfigures representations of the Passion. The Figure on the Cross is an artistic creation of great power. Lightning flashes athwart the deep purple background, splitting the whole

Temple asunder, in a poetic exaggeration of the veil of the Temple being rent in twain. Inset beneath is a skull.

7. (a) The Angel in the Tomb. A symbolic creation of power and mystery, draped in oriental magnificence, with a sword in his left hand, and tongues of fire issuing from his feet. It is one of the most challenging panels in the scheme.

(b) The Appearance to Mary. This panel, although generally the most highly esteemed, is more conventional in its treatment than the others. The atmosphere of early morning is suggested in the amazing blue of the sky. The face of Mary is particularly beautiful. Spring flowers encircle the feet of our Lord.

8. (a) The Supper at Emmaus. This is a panel of great dignity, showing Christ blessing the bread, and recognition dawning on the faces of the two disciples. Inset beneath is one of the loveliest little pictures in the whole scheme. It shows the disciples inviting Christ to enter their home, and the scene is bathed in the mystical dim light of evening, with a glow of light issuing from the open door.

(b) The Ascended Christ. The tense colours of the Passion windows have faded now to pale opalescent tints. The Kingly Figure seems to be floating upwards. There is a suggestion of something intangible, ethereal, in the palely jewelled lights. Inset beneath is a small vividly contrasting panel of the Descent of the Holy Spirit, with tongues as of fire, on the waiting disciples.

As the windows are comparatively small (a little less than six feet in height), small sections of glass were necessarily employed. This gives a remarkably "jewelled" effect to the glass. Nor has the artist forgotten that the first purpose of a window is to let in light. It is surprising how little the light is obscured, even by the most tensely coloured windows. It was a great advantage having the whole scheme planned and carried out at one time. Not only was the scheme given unity, but the artist was enabled to compose a symphony of colour, a thing very difficult, if not impossible to do, when windows are added at various times, and often by various artists.

The church is open every day, and offers to the visitor a fine example of modern church building and furnishing at its best.

ALEXANDER SMART.