

**THE CHAPEL OF ST. JOHN
HEADQUARTERS
OF THE ROYAL ORDER OF SCOTLAND**

Bro. D. Currie P.M. Lodge Canongate Kilwinning No.2

The Chapel of St. John was erected in 1735 by the membership of the Canongate Kilwinning Lodge who, prior to that year, had no permanent quarters of their own. We are aware, from entries in the minutes, that they met before 1735 in private houses and in premises belonging to other bodies. The minutes of 1735 and 1736 make it clear that the Lodge purchased a piece of ground in St. John Street, and in less than twelve months they had built a new home at a cost of £400. It is probable that the Chapel itself, and the room immediately below it were built as an extension to property which already existed, as can be deduced from differences in architecture. However, the Chapel and the Refectory (originally a stable) were built as a new structure, as is evidenced by minutes of 1735 and 1736. Attempts have recently been made to prove that the premises were previously part of a private house, or a tenement, but such claims are shown, by the minutes, to have no foundation. This fact is important, for it proves that the premises are the oldest purpose-built Masonic premises in the world.

Lodge Canongate Kilwinning, No.2 on the Roll of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, owned the building and held all its meetings there from 1745 until a few years ago. At that time an inordinate amount of maintenance work had to be done, and the membership had reduced to about thirty active members. At that juncture, the Council increased the rates on the property to £3000 per year, the members being placed in an impossible position. At this juncture the Royal Order of Scotland suggested that the Lodge members should transfer ownership to the Order, and without following the details of the transfer we can say that ownership was transferred. The Royal Order, a world-wide organisation has expended in excess of half a million pounds in improving the property, and has been generous enough to allow the Lodge to continue its meetings there at a very low rental. Furthermore, the alterations carried out by the Order have not altered the appearance of the inside or outside of the building in any deleterious way.

The Freemasons of Scotland can show that they are descended from the stonemasons of the Middle Ages who built so many of Scotland's Abbeys and

Cathedrals. In Edinburgh, building work within the city was controlled by one of the earliest Lodges of stonemasons, or Operative masons, the Lodge of Edinburgh, Mary's Chapel, which is now No.1 on the Roll of Grand Lodge. The Canongate, in those early days was a separate Burgh, with its own core of Stonemasons. They had existed since the building of Holyrood Abbey, but it was not until 1677 that they sought to become a Chartered Lodge, and this was effected by making a petition to the Ancient Lodge of Kilwinning in Ayrshire. Twelve members signed the petition, but we have no record of their activities until 1735, when the first existing minute book was commenced. During the intervening years the character of the Lodge had changed completely. There was only one stonemason on the books, the other members being drawn from the Merchant class, the professions and the Customs Service. Later members came from the Aristocracy, the Navy and the Army, and one of our members, Major William Ewart, was the first Scotsman to fly an aircraft, having been taught to do so by Bleriot.

In 1735 the Chapel and the Stable were smaller than they are today, having been extended into the street about 1911. I have mentioned that the Refectory was originally a Stable, where during the 18th century, the members kept their horses whilst meetings were held in the Chapel. The Refectory has an interesting fireplace, but only during the last three years have I learned of the most interesting article in the room, the small staircase. This has been reconstructed on many occasions over the years, but it has existed from the earliest days of the building, and its purpose, according to the original plans of the building, was to give access from the Stable to the Old Playhouse, which stood next door. I had earlier realised that from the 18th century there had been very close connections between the Playhouse and the Lodge, and it appears that many of our more prominent members were numbered among the owners of the theatre, several of the more renowned actors being members of the Lodge. One of these was William H. Murray, who is described as a comedian. He appears to have later been associated with the theatre Royal. He was a nephew of another of our members, John Murray of Broughton, whose name was erased from our records after 1745, when his evidence played a decisive part in sending Lord Lovat to his execution.

The Chapel itself is immediately above the Refectory, being flanked to the South by a staircase, and to the North by the Secretary's Room and the Old Kitchen. This latter chamber is almost certainly part of the earlier building, before the Lodge

premises were built. It is customary for Masonic Lodge Rooms to have one entrance, in the South-West corner, but the Chapel has two, the extra one being in the North-West. I suggest that this door was set there for one reason - to give easy access to the Secretary's Room and the Old Kitchen. If we stand in the West of the Chapel and face the East, we see the Master's Chair and his lectern. Overhead is a carved wooden canopy and on either side of the Chair are windows, now blinded by the 1911 extension. Behind the Chair is a mural of Masonic emblems, of which the most prominent is the All-seeing eye. We still possess an original invoice from 1735 which shows the cost of the Canopy, together with curtains for the doors and windows, came to nine shillings and sixpence. During 1972 and 1973, I had the honour to be Master of the Lodge, and the Chair in which I sat had been used since 1735. I was succeeded in Office by an Irishman, who demolished the Chair when he took his seat. From the West, we see that the Chairs of the two Wardens are in the North-West corner (Senior Warden) and the South-West Corner (Junior Warden). Other Lodges have these seats in the centre of the West and of the South, respectively, but originally All Scottish Lodges used our system. The change came from England, but we cannot be sure of the reason. The first Master to sit in the Chair in 1735 was Robert Trotter, a wealthy merchant, whose family name is perpetuated in Trotterhaugh..

If we now move to the East, we can continue the story from that place. Immediately opposite the Master's Chair, a mural on the West wall depicts the beginnings of Masonry in the Canongate with the building of Holyrood Abbey. In the centre background can be seen the construction of the Abbey, and immediately in front of it we see the figure of King David I with his Master of Works. Above them can be seen a workman looking down to them. The juxtapositions of these figures allude to an interesting facet of Freemasonry. The right, left and centre foregrounds carry depictions of various figures, not all of whom I can name. First, it should be explained that this mural is the work of William McLaren, of Cardenden, one of the country's most eminent modern artists, who is now unfortunately deceased. He was not a Freemason, and his picture contains items of Masonic significance which he did not realise; he painted the work after talking to an experienced Past Master for more than two hours.

Taking the figures in the painting from the right, the first is Dr. Alexander F. Buchan, who was a member of this Lodge. He served as Grand Secretary of Scottish Freemasonry from 1947, retiring in 1972, at which time he became Grand Secretary of

the Royal Order of Scotland. Following his death a few years later, the Royal Order commissioned this mural in his memory. Next to Dr Buchan stands William Woods, one of the most famous Shakespearean actors of his day, and next to Woods stands James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, who was Poet laureate of the Lodge in 1846. On Hogg's right side stands the Honourable Henry Erskine, one of Scotland's greatest Lord Advocates. It was Erskine who wished to defend the radical Thomas Muir of Huntershill, who was tried for sedition in 1792, found guilty and shipped to Australia for fourteen years. He had refused Erskine's offer, representing himself to a court packed with his political opponents. After Erskine, we see the graceful figure of Robert Burns, who in 1787 became a member of this Lodge. He was already a Freemason, but our records show his membership. Very strong claims have been made since 1845 that Burns was Poet Laureate of the Lodge, and in Freemasons' Hall, in George Street, there hangs a famous painting which purports to show the ceremony when he received that office. However, there is absolutely no proof that such a ceremony was held, and the minutes show that Burns was in the Lodge on only one occasion. The Office of Poet Laureate is not mentioned, and first appeared on paper in the minutes of 1815. If you wish to learn more of this story, I would ask you to wait until the end of this talk, when I shall be pleased to answer questions. Next to Burns stands a gentleman who is facing away from us, which makes it impossible to say who he represents, but facing us, and apparently speaking to this mystery man, stands the famous James Boswell of Auchinleck, who also held the Chair of this Lodge. Seated on the left side of the picture is Lord Napier, the celebrated mathematician, with two young men standing behind him who are probably his sons. Central to the composition are three figures in working clothes poring over a plan. They represent the three basic stages of Freemasonry, the Apprentice, the Journeyman and the Master Mason.

To either side of this mural there hang two renaissance style paintings. That on the right is the Circumcision of Christ and that on the left, the Annunciation.

If we cast our eyes to the four corners of the room, we see what are apparently four statues, Shakespeare, Burns, Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron. They are in fact flat paintings, deliberately designed to appear as solid figures, such works being known as Trompe L'Oeil, or Trick the Eye. The Lodge members were always advised that similar works could be found in the Palace of Versailles, and that it was probably the same artist who painted them. It was a romantic story, but a few years

ago it was found to be untrue. Having discovered a bundle of old papers among our artefacts, I was cataloguing them when I found one of them was a receipt which read:- 'To painting full length portraits of Sir Walter Scott, Burns, Byron and Shakespeare on the walls, £12-0-0.' It was not on the paper of a painter of the French Court, but on the paper of Messrs Coulson, Painters and Decorators, who were well known in Edinburgh in 1833, and was dated 30th October of that year. Thus, each figure cost £3, but in 1972, when one of them had to be retouched, the cost almost ran into four figures.

On the North Wall, in the North East corner hangs the Charter of the Lodge, dated 1677. Curiously, this Charter establishes the Lodge as part of the Lodge of Kilwinning existing in Edinburgh. My own view, purely speculative, is that this was done purposely in order to prevent the Lodge of Edinburgh from claiming jurisdiction over the Canongate Lodge. In the centre of the North wall there hangs a picture of William St Clair, Scotland's first Grand Master, who was a member of Canongate Kilwinning. The struggle for the Grand Mastership is a story of intrigues, back stabbing, and straightforward skullduggery, but to hear that, I am afraid you would have to ask me to speak to you again. To the right of St. Clair's portrait hangs that of a gentleman of the 18th century, whilst that of a lady of the same era hangs to the right. To find the portrait of a lady in a Masonic Lodge room is most unusual, but the records show there are special reasons for this exception. The portraits are of Baillie and Mrs Jack. The Baillie owned part of the land on which the Lodge was built, and although he was not a member, his nephew, following his death, presented the two paintings to the Lodge. The minutes show that a condition was attached to the gift - Baillie and Mrs. Jack were renowned for their faithfulness to each other in a time of loose moral standards, and the deed of gift states that 'in death, as in life, they are not to be divided'.

Across the room from the St. Clair portrait is the Lodge organ, set in its own space. From 1735 to 1754, music was provided by violinists, who played in the Musicians' Gallery, which ran across the recess. In 1749 the Lodge decided they wished to have an organ, and soon afterward it was learned that Schnitzler, a well known organ builder from London, was to visit Scotland to provide an instrument elsewhere. Contact was made with him, and he visited the Chapel, agreeing to build an organ to be sited in the recess behind the Musicians' Gallery. The cost of the venture was to be £75, this sum to include the price of carriage by sea from London,

and in 1754 Schnitzler advised the Lodge that he had arrived at Leith, with the organ. It was brought to the Lodge by cart, at which stage a problem became apparent. The doors into the building, and into the Chapel were too small to admit the instrument. Fortunately, the land to the rear of the Chapel is at a higher level than at the front, so the West wall of the chapel was breached, and the organ brought in, the wall being repaired immediately. This accounts for the recess containing the mural, and to this day, by walking round to the rear wall, we can see clearly where the breach was made. The members did not pay the full cost to Schnitzler on the grounds that the organ might need repair within a short time, and he accepted that the outstanding balance of £25 would be paid at the end of a year, provided the organ had been trouble free. Twelve months elapsed, whereon the members advised Schnitzler that they were indeed satisfied with his work, and that £25 awaited his collection in Edinburgh. Having examined the records I have concluded that either their attitude softened or they did not lay the outstanding sum, for there appears to be no further mention of the transaction in the minutes. Suffice to say that the organ has been in continuous use since 1754, apart from two periods, one in 1888 and one in 1972, when it was stripped for maintenance purposes. It is played at all Masonic meetings in the Chapel, and has been played for radio and T.V. programmes. Interesting facts include the keys, which are not in the usual colours. Schnitzler used the new colours in all his instruments. He was a very close friend of the composer, Handel, who played most of the organs he built, so it is possible that George Frederick Handel was the first man to play this organ. Inside the woodwork there are two pieces of paper, each signed by Schnitzler, which are the only known examples of his signature. The air is provided by a hand pump, but there is also a treadle which can be used. The working parts, including the bellows, are all original. In 1972 the walls of the Chapel were covered by dark photographs from the Victorian Era, but in that year the interior was cleaned and repainted to make it look as it had been in 1787, when Burns attended.

Leaving the Chapel by the West Porch, we enter the Secretary's room, where the most significant items to be seen are aprons and an Armada Chest. This latter, always referred to as our "Lockit Kist", contains various items, one of which is a Breeches Bible. This book was presented to the Lodge by one of its members in 1745. This man was John Campbell, nephew of the Duke of Perth, who was the first Accountant of the Royal Bank.

Beyond the Secretary's Room is the Old Kitchen, which is older than the Chapel. It holds a splendid 16th Century fireplace which bears a motto reading 'Tomorrow, no sorrows be here.' There are two emblems carved, one before and one after the motto, these being the anchor and the heart. Although both were at one time Masonic emblems, they were used also in many other spheres, so it is not possible to link these two with the Chapel.

This building, and this Lodge, have seen members from a myriad walks of life working as Freemasons within its portals. Among these, apart from those I have already spoken, can be numbered such as Henry McKenzie (the Man of Feeling), numerous Earls, A Prince of the Russian Empire, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling and many men of eminence in their own fields. Sadly, we have also had our failures such as Deacon William Brodie, Eugene Marie Chantrelle and John Murray of Broughton.