

THE COLLEGIATE CHURCH OF ST. MATTHEW

My Search

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Through the years the name Roslin has taken many forms, Roskelin, Roslin, Rosslin, Rosslyn, Rosslynn and quite possibly many others. Today we refer to the village as Roslin and the part of the structure now standing as Rosslyn Chapel. That it has a worldwide reputation as a building of great significance to various religious groups, orders, and many other persons is beyond doubt.

My ideas regarding the Chapel changed considerably over the years. At first, I thought that it was a curious place, intriguing to look at but really just a curio. I used to look around it in the same manner as I would a museum.

I was brought up as a member of the Church of Scotland and naturally I looked at the Chapel through the eyes of a member of the Protestant faith. In my opinion then, it was an irreligious building. Some of the carvings were, I thought, clearly heathen, probably of Norse origin, and it had no communion table, so how could this building possibly have been a centre of the Christian faith?

It took me years to realise that I had been approaching the subject from entirely the wrong direction. This Church is pre-Reformation, it had been built as a Roman Catholic Church and what did I know about the Roman Church? To be honest, when I thought about it; nothing. Oh, I knew they had Priests and that the head of the Church was the Pope but basically that was just about it, the sum of my knowledge concerning the Roman Church.

Various claims have been made regarding, the design, the spatial architecture and decoration of the interior of the building by many writers. They have attributed the extant results to a variety of sources some of which are credible and, putting it kindly, some that are incredible.

I now understand it to be part of an incomplete Roman Catholic Collegiate Church.

Church History

In 1067 an English Princess, born in Hungary in 1046 and resident at the English Saxon Court for 10 years, sought refuge with Malcolm Canmore while on the run from William the Conqueror. Malcolm's decision to grant it was the forerunner to a remarkable period in Scottish history on both the religious and political fronts.

The Princess in question later became Malcolm's Queen, Margaret, a pious and beautiful lady. She was a devout Roman Catholic and is the only Royal in Britain to have become a Saint. She is well remembered to this day, Queensferry, St. Margaret's Hope, Cave, and Chapel are all named after her. The couple had six sons and two daughters, all deeply religious. Three of her sons were Kings of Scots, her elder daughter was a Queen of England and her younger daughter was the mother of a Queen of England.

The Canmore dynasty changed the orientation of the Christian Church in Scotland from the Celtic form to the Roman form. It introduced various Orders and others followed in their wake. By the 13th century the Augustinian, Benedictine, Cistercians, Cluniac, Tironensian, and Premonstratensian Orders together with the Dominican and Franciscan Friars were all present. The great Border Abbeys and Holyrood Abbey were built, St Andrew's Cathedral flourished and parish churches had appeared. The Vicar of Rome was supreme.

Latin was the language of the Church. In pre-Reformation Scotland illiteracy was the order of the day. It is telling that in the 15th century James IV passed a Law, ordering that the eldest son of wealthy parents had to be sent to school or college. Less than 5% of the population could read and write.

So in the 15th century, as in centuries before and after, the rich were very rich, and some of them were literate, the poor were very poor and, I am quite sure, the Church prospered no matter what. It was the 15th century that saw the rise of the Collegiate Church, or as one writer put it '*a building for God*'.

What is a Collegiate Church?

As far as I can ascertain there are, or have been, forty five Collegiate Churches in Scotland. They are in essence a church set up, by their founder, to pray for the soul of the founder and his family; with the thought no doubt that this would guarantee them their rightful place in the hereafter. These establishments were staffed by a Provost,

Prebendaries and Choristers. The size and the splendour of the church depended on the wealth of the founder and perhaps the magnitude of his sins. Some, such as Seton and St. Giles had been parish churches; others such as Rosslyn were purpose built

Who was St. Matthew?

Matthew was an Apostle and Evangelist whose name was derived from the Hebrew Mattija meaning the tax gatherer and shortened to Mattai the name conferred on him by Jesus. His Hebrew name was Levi and he is mentioned in the Bible at:

Matthew Chapter 9, Verse 9.

And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man named Matthew, sitting at a receipt of custom; and he saith unto him . Follow me. And he arose, and followed Him.

Mark Chapter 3 Verse 18

Seventh in the list of Apostles.

Luke Chapter 6 Verse 15

Again seventh.

Matthew Chapter 10 Verse 3

Eighth place.

Acts Chapter 1 Verse 13

Again eighth.

He accompanied Christ up to the time of his Passion, witnessed the Resurrection and was present at the Ascension.

The Founding Family

Let's now take a look at the family responsible for the building of the church. The Sinclairs or Saint Claires were an old Norman family who had been awarded the Barony of Rosslyn by King David the First in the 12th century.

Sir William (c.1260-c.1303) fought against Edward I in the Wars of Independence. His grandson, also Sir William, was slain in Spain by the Saracens in August 1330 whilst accompanying Sir James Douglas en route to Palestine with the heart of The Bruce. He was succeeded by his infant son William who in time married Isabel the daughter and heiress of The Earl of Strathearn, Caithness and Orkney,

(d.1350). The dignity of the Earldom of Orkney, was granted in 1379 by Hakon VI, King of Norway to their son Sir Henry.

His grandson, William, the third (Norwegian) Earl became the Chancellor of Scotland in 1454 and Lord Sinclair and Earl of Caithness in 1455. In 1470 when the Orkney Islands were ceded to Scotland under James III, William resigned all his rights in Orkney to the Crown and was then known as the Earl of Caithness. This is the man responsible for the building we now see at Rosslyn.

After his death, Roslynn passed to his second son Oliver who did very little to continue his father's work, Oliver's descendants became a junior branch of the Sinclair family. It was a descendant of Oliver, one William Sinclair who became the first Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Scotland.

It is interesting to note that the time that elapsed from the dissolution of the Templars to the starting of the building was 135 years. Also the timespan from starting the work to the installation of the first Scottish Grand Master was 295 years.

Roslyn Chapel Architecture

There are two major points we must consider concerning the architecture of the church. Firstly, Roslyn came under the see of St. Andrews and the design would come under the control of that body. Secondly, architecture is a pragmatic and progressive science. Ideas that had proved sound previously would be incorporated in later buildings.

The Master Mason (Architect) would present his designs to the client and then to the Church authority. After approval the design of the church would be drawn on a drawing floor none of which have survived in Scotland, although in Roslyn there are drawings on the walls in the lower chamber (Sacristy). On the north wall there is a drawing of an arch and a cusped vaulting rib of one of the eastern chapels, whilst on the south wall we have a diagram of a pinnacle.

These drawings would be used to consult with the client, as to the way forward, but would also allow the carpenters to cut wooden templates from eastern board, obtained from the Baltic area. These templates were then forwarded to the stonemasons who would cut the stone blocks accordingly.

There are twenty two mason's marks at Rosslyn which indicates that at least that number of stonemasons worked on the building. There would also be apprentices,

wrights, cordiners, a hammerman to sharpen the tools and numerous labourers involved. The church was planned as a large cruciform building with the choir being a smaller version of the choir in Glasgow Cathedral and with an eastern ambulatory containing four chapels. The porch is also a copy of the porch at the entrance to St, Kentigern's tomb. There are many other architectural similarities with other buildings, the window tracery, the flying buttresses, pinnacles, corbels and canopies. McGibbon and Ross in their *Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland* state that '*had the church been finished in same spirit as that in which it has so far been carried out, it would have gone far to realise a poet's dream in stone*'.

As previously stated, Sir William, the third Earl of Orkney decided to build a collegiate church dedicated to St. Matthew, probably the building work started in 1446 or 1447, the Scotichronicon states that in 1447, '*Dominus Willemus de Sancto Claro Comes Orcadiea est in fabricando sumptuosam structuram apud Roslyn*'. It was to be staffed by a Provost, six Prebendaries and two singing boys or Choristers. This was a massive and costly undertaking but unfortunately never completed. What remains are the sacristy and choir of what was to be a cross church.

Let us consider first the spatial architecture of Rosslyn, the length of the choir is 48 feet 4 inches (14.706 mtrs) the central is aisle 17 feet 10.5 inches (5.448 mtrs) wide and the width over the aisles is 35 feet (10.664 mtrs.) height 41 feet 9 inches (12.535 mtrs). The metric measurements are my own recorded using a laser measuring tool. The length across the transepts as founded is about 72 feet. Mr. Thomson, Custodier of the Chapel, (mid 1800s?) who saw the west walls of the transepts exposed stated that the transepts were intended to be 18 feet wide, The Rev. Mr. Thompson, Chaplain to the St. Claires, in his '*Guide to the Chapel*' 1892 (A facsimile has been reprinted by the Masonic Publishing Co. of Helensburgh, and is obtainable from the Grand Lodge of Scotland) stated that the foundations for the entire building had been laid and that those of the nave which extended to about 91 feet to the west had been dug up and exposed at the beginning of the 19th century.

The choir has north and south aisles, connected by an aisle across the east end, and as previously stated gives access to four chapels, starting with the north they are dedicated to, St. Matthew, The Blessed Virgin, St. Andrew, and St. Peter. The choir both internal and external is symmetrical; the bays are all of the same dimensions. The buttresses rise unbroken, five on each of the north and south sides, above each are two

massive pinnacles, connected by a small flying buttress. The outer pinnacles are square in plan. The inner are oblong in plan. The aisle windows all have two lights and the tracery in each case is the same in the opposite window. The eastern chapel windows all have the engrailed cross of the St. Clairs worked in with the tracery. The clerestory windows are all of the same design and are single light. The window tracery is similar to that used in Melrose Abbey.

The choir roof is a pointed barrel vault and is divided into compartments by strengthening ribs and decorated from the east to west with daisies, lilies, flowers, roses and stars. The aisle roofs are peculiar in construction, A lintel with a relieving arch above, with pointed barrel vaults at right angles to the centre aisle; the roofs are decorated with the engrailed cross. The roof of the Lady's or eastern chapel has groined vaulting, with the diagonals meeting at the apex. In place of a boss there are 4 foot long pendants, the whole being exquisitely carved.

Beside the stair to the Sacristy on the south wall there is a square headed piscina, and on the south side of the other alters are ogee headed recesses in the wall. To the east of the south door, is a richly carved stoup. In the transepts there are the remains of three canopied piscinas two in the south and one in the north transept, they generally resemble, in their details, the sacrament houses in some northern churches and the piscinas in Melrose Abbey.

The unique part of Roslin Chapel is the decoration or more correctly the profusion of it. I cannot see where any more could be placed; it is a biblical story in stone.

The references that have been given with a regard to the Knights Templar point to the moulding depicting two men on one horse. In fact this moulding shows one man on the horse and one standing behind holding a cross together with a third century icon of Jesus Christ, the "Jesu Agnus Dei" The Lamb of God. It has been pointed out that the Templars used this as their emblem. Not strictly true, every picture I have seen of the KT emblem, containing the icon, shows in addition, a staff with the Templar flag on top.

The damaged moulding of the head of the so called apprentice, I suggest, depicts a man in his mid thirties, a very serene and peaceful face and extremely well carved. The mouldings of the so called Master and Mother are extremely crudely

carved and do not fit in with the other carvings. By no stretch of the imagination, would the Catholic church have allowed the effigy of a murderer to face the Virgin Mary. I cannot find any credible evidence for or answer to the story of the “Prentice” pillar.

Statements from McGibbon and Ross

It is appropriate to conclude with some statements from the great Scottish architectural commentators McGibbon and Ross.

*In Rosslyn College we have the finest example of the late Scottish forms of vaulting carried out to their fullest extent, together with some exceptional designs. This church differs from most of the other **collegiate churches** in having side aisles, and also in having groined vaults in the east end. The plan of the latter portion of the building, being copied from the arrangement at the east end of Glasgow Cathedral, has been carried out with groining, in imitation of the original; but in the other parts of the structure the vaulting conforms to that of the third pointed period in Scotland. The main central roof is covered with a continuous pointed barrel vault without a break, except an ornamental rib over each division of the bays. The soffits of each panel of the arch thus formed are carved with stars, fleur-de-lys, and other enrichments. The side aisles are also covered with a series of pointed barrel vaults. Each of these aisle vaults forms an extension of the main pier arch of the choir, carried across the aisle at right angles to the main choir. The Scottish plan of avoiding groins is thus adhered to. The above arrangement of the aisle vaults also enables the aisle windows to be carried up to a good height. The barrel vaults across the aisles rest on flat arches (made to resemble straight lintels), which run between the caps of the main piers and the responds against the walls. The whole construction recalls that of a castle with a large central hall roofed with a barrel vault, and having a series of side chambers entering off it, each covered with its separate barrel vault running at right angles to the main building. If the partitions between these side chambers were removed, and plain arches or lintels substituted, the construction would be exactly that of Rosslyn Church. Such a series of chambers, with barrel vaults running at right angles to a passage, is of common occurrence in the ground floors of the Scottish castles. An exceptional feature connected with the main vault of*

Rosslyn Church is that the same stones which form the interior arch also form the outside roof the usual overlapping stone covering being omitted, possibly to avoid the extra weight. The exterior of the roof is thus curved like the interior. During the late pointed period many varieties of details were indulged in. The buttresses are generally somewhat stunted. They are plain and solid, and have often rather elaborate canopies and corbels for statues placed on the front of the buttresses, without recessed niches. The buttresses have frequently numerous set-offs, and are generally finished with stunted square pinnacles having crocketed finials. The windows are almost always pointed, and contain simple tracery derived from the earlier styles. The copying of the forms of the older styles is specially noticeable in the windows and traceries.

At Rosslyn, where there are side aisles, the side walls of the choir are carried up so as to permit of clerestory windows. The tracery is almost always set in the centre of the wall, and the same mouldings, usually double chamfers, are repeated in the reveal both on the inside and outside.

So, what would have been if completed, was a Church approximately 147 feet long, by 35 feet wide standing east to west, with north and south transepts and a single central tower 18 feet square.

Obviously, operative Masons built the Church and 22 masons marks have been found in the building but I cannot find any reference or indication that the Freemasons or the Knights Templar had anything to do with the building of this church. The building that, if completed, would have been the very ornate Roman Catholic Collegiate Church of St. Matthew at Rosslyn.

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Glossary

Apostles

The twelve chief Disciples of Jesus Christ.

Ascension

The ascension of Christ into heaven on the fortieth day after the Resurrection.

Aumbry

Small recess or cupboard in the wall of a church.

Buttress

A projecting support of stone or brick built against a wall.

Choir

The part of a Cathedral or large church between the altar and the nave, used by the clergy.

Corbel

A projection jutting out from a wall to support a structure above it.

Cornice

A horizontal moulded projection crowning a building or structure,

Crocket

Small carved ornament, typically a bud or curled leaf, on the inclined side of a pinnacle or gable.

Flying Buttress

A buttress slanting from a separate column, typically forming an arch with the wall it supports.

Nave

The central part of a Church building intended for the congregation.

Ogee

A double continuous 'S' shaped curve.

Passion

The suffering and the death of Jesus.

Piscina

A stone basin near the altar in Catholic and pre-Reformation Churches for draining water used in the mass.

Prebend

The portion of the revenues of a cathedral or collegiate church formerly granted to a canon or member of the Chapter as his stipend.

Prebendary

An honorary canon.

Resurrection

Christ's rising from the dead.

Stoup

A basin for holy water, especially on the wall near the door of a RC church. Worshipers would dip their fingers in before crossing themselves.