

"A Brief History"



by Alan Harding

St  **COLUMBA'S**
BY THE CASTLE
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The 1840s: the foundation of St. Columba's

St. Columba's was founded in 'the hungry forties' of the nineteenth century, when the Old Town of Edinburgh was notorious for its poverty and degradation. The poor, many of them Irish or Highland immigrants, had crowded into the tenements left by the wealthy for the splendours of the New Town, and the building in the 1830s of George IV Bridge and of a road giving access to the city from the west (soon to be named Johnston Terrace) bypassed and further depressed the Cowgate and Grassmarket area, previously main routes into the city. A campaign led by Thomas Chalmers to provide Presbyterian churches for the poor saw the building of St. John's Victoria Street, opened in 1840. Then the Disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843 sparked the building of many new 'free churches', among them Free St. John's (only since 1907 Free St. Columba's), which Thomas Guthrie opened in 1845 overlooking his first church from the top of Johnston Terrace. At the same time John Alexander, the mission priest at the decrepit Episcopal chapel of St. Paul's Carrubbers Close, was persuading a group of advocates resident in the New Town but gaining their living at the law courts in the Old Town to raise money to build a more worthy church for his congregation.

The new Episcopal church opened in 1846 further down Johnston Terrace from Guthrie's Free Church, in the shadow of the only other building yet standing on the south side of the street, the Church of Scotland's Normal School for the training of Highland school teachers (now the Castle Rock Hostel). Intended to provide pastoral care for poor English and Irish Episcopalians (numerous soldiers from living quarters round the Castle would be married and their children baptised there), St Columba's also provided Scots with a haven from the storm of the Disruption, so Alexander claimed. With limited funds, he dispensed relief to destitute Episcopalians in the West Port and the Grassmarket, mainly on condition that their children attended St. Columba's day school below the church, where for more than thirty years up to two hundred boys and girls less respectable than those at the Normal School next door received free meals as well as an education.

The church was saved by the determination of a small group of working-class 'old Columbans' led by Willie Anderson, who had been baptised by Father Flower in 1905 and in 1919 sang in the choir at the 'fully choral' funeral conducted by the bishop of Miss Helen Espinasse, who had been present at the church's consecration in 1848 (she was the daughter of a French naval officer who stayed on and married in Scotland after captivity in the Napoleonic wars). Willie served at the altar and as a vestryman or Rector's warden from 1928 until a few years before his burial from St. Columba's in 1982. In 1949 he persuaded the Bishop to find another solution: to bring the Revd. Mark Kemp from England to be incumbent of St. Columba's and at the same time Director of the Industrial Christian Fellowship for the Diocese.

Kemp made creative use of the hall for ICF activities and at the Edinburgh Festival season, but his great contribution was his enthusiasm for liturgical renewal. Kemp discontinued 8 a.m. services on a Sunday (at which most people took communion) and also the 11 o'clock sung service (at this the organist resigned), in order to bring the whole of the small congregation together at a 10 o'clock Eucharist. He got the Vestry's consent to the bringing forward of the altar from the east wall so that the liturgy could be celebrated facing the congregation, and to the removal of part of the chancel screen so that the people could see what was enacted in the sanctuary. When the east window was found unsafe and had to be bricked up, John Busby, a member of the congregation, was commissioned to paint the mural of Christ in Majesty (which has divided opinion ever since). A book on *Liturgy and Architecture* was soon hailing St. Columba's as 'the focal point for liturgical renewal' in the Scottish Episcopal Church. The turning point in the church's fortunes came when Anglican students at the University, whose numbers had outgrown their chaplaincy, chose St. Columba's as the place where they could take communion together. Young families, often of members of the university staff, began to arrive, and a dying 'territorial' church was revived as a 'gathered' church.

1846-1869: the Revd. John Alexander's ministry marred by liturgical controversy

The new church was named St. Columba's rather than St. Paul's because at the last moment the majority of the vestry of the old chapel refused to move, and it happened to be near St. Columba's day that the undaunted John Alexander led much of his congregation off to Johnston Terrace. The source of contention was liturgical. Many of the 'gentlemen of the Episcopal Church' who founded St. Columba's, headed by members of the Forbes family, originated from Aberdeenshire, where the traditional liturgy of the Church had been kept alive during the period of its clergy's proscription for involvement in the Jacobite rebellions. The Forbesees were the leading family in the Scottish Episcopal Church, and they were determined that the new church be committed to the use of the historic 'Scotch communion office', rather than the service in the Book of Common Prayer. Their efforts to re-establish the Scottish liturgy gained the support of Pusey and the Oxford Movement but was resisted by the evangelicals predominant among the English-trained clergy, who had alone been permitted to officiate in 'the penal years'.

By the influence of his friend W.E.Gladstone (the future prime minister) Alexander Penrose Forbes, 'the Scottish Pusey', was elected Bishop of Brechin in time to preach in January 1848 at the consecration of St. Columba's, where his elder brother William and two sisters were mainstays of the congregation. Ten years later he brought the liturgical controversy to a head by his teaching on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, which led to one of his own clergy charging him with heresy and his fellow bishops to try and censure him. Forbes went on to be recognised as one of Scotland's greatest bishops, but John Alexander's ministry did not recover from the uproar. An irascible man who was determined not to be ordered about by the Forbesees, he joined in the theological argument against Alexander Penrose Forbes, and William Forbes and other wealthy members of St. Columba's left the congregation., soon to find a home in the fine new church of All Saints, Brougham Place. In 1869 Alexander retired disillusioned by the loss of support and the struggle to meet the expense of the school.

1869-1925: The working-class church of Rectors Bowden and Flower

St. Columba's home missionary calling was vigorously taken up again in the later part of the nineteenth century, when St. Columba's claimed to be in membership the poorest church in Edinburgh. Alexander always lived in the New Town, but Charles Bowden, Rector from 1872 to 1888, moved with his curates into 'St. Columba's Mission House' at no. 11 in the tenement block just built between the church and Free St. John's. At no. 8 Johnston Terrace the Post Office Directories of the 1880s show 'St. Columba's Church depot', and at no. 7 a 'Home for Poor and Aged Women, and for Little Children'. This was the mother house of the Sisterhood of Holy Charity, one of the religious communities which Alexander Penrose Forbes worked to reintroduce into Scotland; in its first four years it was reported to have provided shelter for seventy children, yet the resident members of the Order and their 'external associates' were also able to look after the church building, the superintendence of the school, the visitation and relief of the poor, and the use of a Working Women's Mission-Room. Bowden encouraged every member of the congregation to join one of the guilds attached to the church, for 'it was not good for man to be alone'. At no. 13 Johnston Terrace (across the steps from Victoria Terrace at the east end of the church) there was the Guild of St. Giles, the premises of which included a reading room and the offices of the St. Giles Press (chairman: the Rector) from which was started the Episcopal Church Directory, the precursor of the Year Book. For a generation, the entry in the ECD for St. Columba's proclaimed the church to have been 'the pioneer of the Oxford Movement in Scotland'.

In 1888 Bowden pronounced himself exhausted and exchanged charges with Herbert Flower, another Englishman brought to Scotland by high church connections, who was the incumbent of the mission church founded at Glencarse in Brechin Diocese in the last years of Bishop Forbes. The wealth of his wife, the only daughter of Colonel Henry Knight Erskine of Pittodrie whom he met as a lay reader in Aberdeen, was essential to Flower's ministry, and also allowed him to live at the Castle Esplanade end of Patrick Geddes's newly developed Ramsay Garden in what until recent years still bore the name of Pittodrie House. Bowden's enterprises on Johnston terrace seem to have faded quite quickly, but the closure of the day school a few years after the Act of 1872 which provided state education for all freed the schoolrooms to become a

true church hall. There had been no internal connection between church and hall while the school received a grant from the Education Committee of the Privy Council, which could not be seen to subsidize a church, but at last in 1896 one was 'ingeniously inserted' by the church secretary, John Henderson's son George, in the form of a steep and narrow stair which would serve for a hundred years.

This was the great age of Sunday Schools, and the St. Columba's school increased in numbers from forty in 1878 to over 200 by 1894. With its prize givings, Christmas treats and summer excursions, when the children would march off to the station with banners flying, the school attracted many new families to the church. About 2000 of the 6000 or so baptisms in the church registers were in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and 400 of the 1300 confirmations. Strikingly, only 180 of the 641 people confirmed at St. Columba's between 1888 and 1914 had been baptised here and in many cases baptism was immediately before confirmation; 150 had been baptised as 'Established Presbyterians' (i.e. in the Church of Scotland, perhaps at St. John's, Victoria Street), 74 in the Free Church or the United Presbyterian Church, and 25 as Roman Catholics.

A writer in St. Columba's church magazine in 1969 remembered the Rector being so affected by the death of their only son, Lieutenant Henry Erskine-Flower, in the Boer War, that from 1901 the church began to go down hill. Father Flower still claimed a church membership of 850 at his retirement in 1925, but the signs are that many more of the boys he had baptised and confirmed did not return after the Great War than died in action. (There are 21 men on the memorial to the right of the chancel arch, three of them in fact killed in Edinburgh in a Zeppelin raid.)

1925-1958: Decline and revival

Herbert Flower was succeeded by the Revd. Henry Johnston from St. Luke's, Dundee. This bachelor son of a judge set about repairing the fabric of the church and had lavatories installed in the hall (the school children had used privies outside), and appears to have been the first to use the name 'St. Columba's by the Castle' to distinguish his church from the church at the top of the road which in 1907 had been made the Assembly Hall of the Continuing Free Church (the "Wee Frees") and taken in the congregation of St. Columba's in Cambridge Street that stayed out of the union of much of the Free Church with the United Presbyterian Church.

Johnston died suddenly in 1929, leaving to the church its first Rectory at 9 Ramsay Garden, along with a considerable endowment, and the treasurer of the church, always previously known as Major Gray, was chosen to succeed him. This was the Revd. Frederick Gray, who had married Flower's daughter Isobel in 1910, when he was a curate at All Saints and an enthusiastic officer of the Church Lads' Brigade. Having become Rector of St. Ninian's Castle Douglas at the beginning of the Great War he was commissioned into the local battalion of the King's Own Scottish Borderers, and after the war, in which there is no evidence that he ever saw fighting, he had stayed on for two years as an Education Officer and then returned to Edinburgh to be Welfare Supervisor of the North British Rubber Company in Fountainbridge and Commanding Officer of the Castle Mills Cadet Battalion of the Territorial Army.

In Gray's time as Rector the movement of population from the Old Town to new council estates on the periphery of Edinburgh combined with the general decline in church attendance to reduce the congregation from a reported 400 in 1931 (200 of them communicants, 70 children in the Sunday School) to 161 in 1948 (116 of them communicants, 15 children). When Gray died in 1949 the bishop decided that St. Columba's must close, as another Victorian mission church in the Old Town, St. Andrew's, Holyrood Road, had closed.

A gathered church working for the local community

The church blossomed under George Martineau, who became Rector and Diocesan Missionary in 1958, when Kemp moved to Canada. By the time of his death in 1969 communicants numbered 241, total membership was 375 and average attendance at the Sunday Eucharist was around a hundred. Since then numbers have fallen again, and average attendance is around 50 and total membership 120. Yet in the 1990s the congregation was able to raise enough money to trigger grants from the lottery fund and Historic Scotland and undertake a major refurbishment of the building. The steep stair from the church down to the hall, impossible for old people, was replaced, a lift installed, and new rooms created in the west tower and a proper kitchen installed. Our more convenient building has become host during the week to a wide variety of community groups; the new Vaulted Room below the chancel took in the Scottish Churches' Parliamentary Officer while the Parliament was close by, then housed the Christian Fellowship of Healing, and now provides office accommodation to Vocal, an organization run by carers for carers.

The most inspiring development in the last fifty years has been in relations with our neighbouring churches of Augustine United Reformed Church and Greyfriars Parish Church with whom we signed a covenant at a memorable service at Pentecost 2002. This pledged us 'to continue to develop our worship and study together' and also, because 'we serve the same community and encounter the same problems', to work 'to establish a united and positive Christian presence in the centre of Edinburgh'. The three congregations enjoy regular joint services, including one every August at the glorious medieval abbey on Inchcolm in the Forth, and we have learnt in a wonderful way how our liturgies come together and enrich each other. We join in Lent study and could do so in numerous Christian educational activities (e.g. about environmental and fair trade concerns) if there were more days in the week. And we work together to support the Grassmarket Mission and the Greyfriars Community Project, which seek to serve an area with all the problems and opportunities of an old city centre.