LEPROSY
IN
DUNFERMLINE
IN
THE MIDDLE AGES

Robert Henryson’s “Testament of Cressseid,”
Is painted by Virginia Connolly on the walls of
The Presence Chamber in Abbot House Dunfermline.

Compiled by Sheila Pitcairn
LEPROSY

IN

DUNFERMLINE

IN

THE MIDDLE AGES

Compiled by Sheila Pitcairn, F.S.A. Scot., L.H G
IN THE MIDDLE AGES

A leprous beggar woman with her pathetic cry,
’Sum good my gentyll mayster for God sake.’

The ultimate misery was to be a cripple or a leper. Leprosy, for reasons still not fully understood, became extremely widespread in Europe during the Middle Ages and every large town had its leperhouse. In the 15th and 16th centuries, equally inexplicably, it diminished and in places died out altogether.

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LEPER HOSPITAL ST LEONARDS
Named after St Leonard. From the Chartulary of Dunfermline we learn (Reg. 127) that there was a hospital (for lepers) at Dunfermline as early as 1227. As this hospital is known to have been dependent on the revenues of the Chapel of St Leonard, one would infer that the chapel must have been of more or less the same age as the hospital. [Early Masons & Carpenters J. Webster P.4]

The Hospital was probably named after Leonard, the French anchoret, from whom so many edifices and places in this country have received
St Leonard’s Hospital. – This is the most ancient charitable institution
now in the parish, but the exact date of it has not been ascertained. The
court books belonging to it reach back to 1594, and there is an entry in
1651, mentioning historically the institution to have been in the time of
Malcolm Canmore and Queen Margaret. Tradition says that the latter
was the foundress. The object of it was the maintenance of eight widows,
each of whom was entitled to four bolls of meal, four bolls of malt, eight
loads of coal (now converted into 4d. per load), eight lippies of fine
wheat, eight lippies of groats (dressed oats), and according to one
account, also fourteen loads of turf yearly; with a chamber in the hospital
and a small garden. Some of them had also, at one time, two shillings
silver yearly, to buy pins.

The provision for them is payable, from the produce of sixty-four acres
of land, in the immediate vicinity of the place, where the hospital one
stood. The average annual amount received by each of them, for the last
five years, has been L.8:9:3, with a small deduction for collecting and
public assessments, and one penny for pin money.

It appears that the hospital at one time, consisted of eight rooms, one of
which was appropriate to each widow, and that the windows are
originally obliged to reside within it. But the hospital, it is thought, was
demolished in the troubles during the reign of Charles I or perhaps by
Cromwell’s soldiers after the battle of Inverkeithing, and has never since
been rebuilt. The Widows now reside in their own houses, and receive
2s. per annum, in lieu of accommodation, named “Stance of House and
Yard.”

The Hospital was situated, a little to the south of the Hospital (Spital)
Bridge, at the lower end of the town, on the east side of the road leading
to Queensferry. The private road to Brucefield runs through the spot on which it stood. At the end of the last century, part of the south wall, having the door-posts and a fragment of the door, was standing on the south side of this private road; and the little piece of rising ground, on the north side, where some trees are now growing, was then used as burial-ground. There is no vestige of the edifice now remaining, although the foundations in some places might still be traced, nor of a chapel which is said also to have once belonged to it. The adjacent houses are named the Spital, an evident contractions of Hospital; and the high part of the road, about a quarter of a mile to the south, the Spittal-Crosshead, from a pillar which, according to tradition, was erected there, decorated on the top by a St Andrew’s Cross, and removed probably towards the close of the 16th or 17th century.

CLAPPER
Drawn by Michael Cull-Dodd

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SPITTLAL CROSS HEAD.
1488 - Tradition states that about this period a stone cross pillar stood on a rising ground south of St Leonard’s Hospital, perhaps the Spital Cross Head is derived from it. [Reminiscences of Dunf. P.250]

This stone, possibly the Hospital Cross Head or the Spital Cross was found on the crest of the Hospital Hill at Aberdour Road by workmen while widening the present road. It has been moved onto the grass verge. (Aberdour Road could have been an old road to the east towards St Andrews.)

“As I sat near the Spittel croshead, Dumfarlin I thocht on, An’ o’ its guid broon ale ta sell, But siller I had none!”

[Annals P.369]

(Lines from an “Old Dunfermline Song.”)

A little to the south east at an eminence commanding a fine view of Dunfermline and the surrounding country, usually called ‘The Spittal Crosshead”, so named from the wayside cross which once stood here and of its being in close proximity to the Hospital of St Leonards. An old memorandum in alluding to this locality says ‘on the spital crois held ther ance stoode a prayin cross whereat in aunshant times the pilgrims usit to kneal down and pray wi’ their faces to the abbey.’ [Viagraphy Dunfermlynensis]

Prior to the Reformation, the patronage of the Hospital appears to have belonged to the Abbacy of Dunfermline. They appointed the principal
office-bearers, and present the widows for institution &. Upon the
Reformation, the Abbacy having been gifted by King James VI of
Scotland to his queen, Anne of Denmark, the patronage of the Hospital,
as part of it, is understood to have been included in the gift, and so to
have been subsequently conferred by her, upon the Earl of Dunfermline,
the heritable bailie of the temporal lordship. From him it passed to the
Marquis of Tweeddale, his successor in that office, whose right to it was
questioned about fifty years ago, but then established as belonging to
him, so that it has long been exercised by that family.

A gift by the Queen as patroness of Saint Leonard’s Hospital, to
Elspeth Murray, a widow, daughter of second Patrick Murray, of
Windmillhill, vacant through decease of Katherine Wellwood, dated 25
July 1610. Charter of Confirmation of a Charter of Alienation 11 January
1610, by James Durie, brother german of George Durie of Craigluscar,
with his consent, to Alexander Hinnyman and Elizabeth Turnbull, his
spouse of two acres of the arable land of Saint Leonard’s Hospital, with
the teind sheaves including (Reddendo to the widows and oratrices of the
hospital, one boll malt, one boll oatmeal, half a peck wheat, half a peck of
grain with 2/1 Scots, two loads of coals and four loads of turffs to the said
hospital dated 26 July 1610. [SRO. RH11. 27.4/3 &6]

1614 – Elymosyner of St Leonard’s Hospital, according to a writ, or
deed, Thomas Walker, “Laird of Rhodes,” near Dunfermline, was
Almoner of St Leonard’s Hospital and Chapel lin 1614-1618. The
“Elimosynor” of St Leonard’s Hospital, etc, granted a Writ of Infeftment
for four acres of land, of which he was “the laird,” to William Mudy and
his spouse Margaret Eddison, April 1681. [Annals of Dunf.P274 & 277]

At a meeting of the Provincial Assembly of the Synod of Fife, held in
Dunfermline on 1st April 1651 – three months before the appearance of
Cromwell’s army in the district – Mr. James Espline, the Elymosinar
(almoner of officer appointed by the patrons to look after the institution)
presented a supplication for the re-edifying of the Hospital. The
supplication read as follows:-
“Ane supplication being presentit by Mr James Espline, the Elymosinar
of the Hospital of St Leonards situate besyde the Burgh of Dunfermline,
for himself, and in name of the widows thairof, desiring the charitie of the
several Presbyteries for the re-edifying of the said hospital. The assembly
recommend him to the charities of sever Presbyteries.” It will be noticed
that in the supplication Mr Espline does not mention the Chapel. The
chances are that the Chapel shared the fate of the Abbey in 1560, when
the men of the Reformation banded themselves together to “ding the
Abbeys doon.” In passing along St Leonard’s Place Cromwell’s army would almost undoubtedly fall foul of the ruined Chapel, and the Hospital would of course came in for some attention at the same time – no attempt would be made to distinguish between a chapel and a hospital. Some old houses which appear to have been built of stone from the old Hospital and Chapel were to be seen on the left. Some of these houses disappeared a good many years ago; recently one which bore the date 1666 was demolished. Here is a copy of “lintel-stane”-

16 DG-IM 66.

How the funds became directed from the hospitals after the Reformation will be apparent from the following supplication present in 1581 by the poor people to the King and Parliament of Scotland: - “That the present possessors of sundry benefices, under colour of the Reformation of Religion, have appropriated the whole livings of the hospitals, maison-diens, alms-houses, and bedehouses to their own uses, or have sold the lands land rents thereof for great sums of money in feu ferme. And further, they have demolished the goodly houses that were appointed for receiving and lodging the poor, and have applied the same to their own particular uses, minding that such thing should never be in time coming . . . . the extreme undoing of great numbers of the poor people that were and ought to have sustained thereby.

We quote the following from “J. I.V.’s” article in the Scotsman: -

“From time to time grants in aid of the lepers were made by Acts of Parliament, and from these we gather that anything was thought good enough for the poor leper. Thus it was ordained that which a wild beast was found dead or wounded in the forest, its flesh was to be sent to the nearest leper house, and the same with corrupt or tainted pork or putrid salmon. “Gif only man brings to the market corrupt swine or salmon to be sauld, they sall be taken by the Bailies, and incontinent, without only question, sall be sent to the lepper folke.” Another perquisite to which hospitals were entitled was “evil ale” according to the burgh laws of Scotland of the reign of David I when “sound ale” could be readily obtained at a halfpenny a gallon. “And gif she makis ivil ale, and dols agane the cusome of the toun and he convykit of it, sche sall gif til her mercyment VIIIIs or that thole the lauch of the toun, that is say, be put on the kukstule, and the ale sall be gyffen to the pure folk the twa part, and the thyrt part sent to the hospitale. And rycht sic dome sall be done of meide as of ale.” Pitiable indeed was the lot of those who suffered from this loathsome disease, for from the moment they were adjudged lepers
they lost all privileges of citizenship, all political rights, and were held to be incapable of conducting their own family business, or even the disposal of their own property. By both the civil and ecclesiastical law; they were regarded as virtually dead. They were prohibited from entering inns, churches, mills, and bake-houses; even the water gushing out of the common fountain was forbidden them. There were other stringent regulations in force such as those of the Magistrates of Glasgow, who ordained: - “That the Lippers of the hospital sall gang onlie on the calsie syde near the gutter, ang sall haif clapperis, and ane claith upoun thair mouth and face, and sall stand afar off quhil they resaif almous, &.” The necessity for rules such as these is apparent when we realize the shocking appearance of the people afflicted with this painful malady. The reason why the poor leper was made to “stand afar off” was that from the body of the leper spread the sickening odour of a corpse, as much of the body was dead long before the patient had reached the end of his days. In the “Testament of Cresseid,” written about 1500 by Robert Henryson, schoolmaster of Dunfermline, will be found a graphic description of the more striking symptoms of leprosy, as he must have frequently beheld them.” [Dunf. Journal 26.9.1903]
of alms, and, of course, treasurer, who granted rights to the owners of the lands, and gave institution to the widows presented by the patrons. The Ellmosinar had certain fees belonging to his office, arising from the quit-rents of some of the lands. Under the Eimosinar there was a bailie named by him, which had jurisdiction in caused respecting the hospital such as compelling payment of quit-rents to the widows, expelling such of the widows as behaved improperly, &. Robert Douglas Esq., banker, Dunfermline is the present Eimosinar, who as an officer under him, with a small salary. [Chalmers Vol. I. p.452-4]

A GRAVEYARD

Adjoining the Hospital and the last interment record was in 1799. In the year 1854 whilst some gravelly soil was being removed in a corner in the north east side of the old God’s acre a skeleton of a man was found. It is generally believed that the Hospital and the Chapel were wrecked in 1651 by Cromwell and his army while on their way to Dunfermline after the battle of Pitreavie. It is quite possible that the Cromwellian victors may have done some wrecking work at St Leonard’s but it is proved beyond doubt by documents that the Hospital and Chapel of St Leonard’s were in a dilapidated state before the battle of Pitreavie. The battle of Pitreavie took place on 10th July 1651, and it was on 20th August that the Kirk Session of Dunfermline met to consider “the boareds and seats of the Session house and the Kirk boxe being all broken the hail money in the said box being all plundrit and taken away be Cromwell’s men.” [Dunf. Journal 26.9.1903]

The last burial in St Leonards Churchyard took place in 1780, the infant son of Tinker Gordin Drummond. [Anent Vol.VI.36 by D. Thomson]

As an additional evidence of there having been a small burying-ground attached to St Leonard’s Hospital here noticed, there was found, October 17 1858, along with other bones, an skull, having all the upper and lower teeth in their places, and presenting a good phrenological forehead. The relic was brought to the Manse, and left there. [Chalmers Vol.2. P.416]

St Leonard’s chapel and hospital. These existed at the south end of the town, upon the site now occupied by the older St Leonard’s school and the farm road to its south. There was undoubtedly a burial-ground here,
and the writer saw many bones exposed about the year 1890. St Leonard’s Well still remains a little to the south-east, an though now built up is recognizable. [Dunf. Burgh Records by D Beveridge P.xxiv]

St Leonard’s Well had a short ‘dog’ stair carefully covered over, within the entrance of the road leading to Brucefield from Hospital Hill. It was a shallow, but constant spring, soft and pleasant to the taste, and was never completely dry in summer. [Old Dunf. Mima Robertson P.120]

Dunfermline Journal of 26 September 1903 reports - In the Scotsman of Monday an interesting article prepared on Pre-reformation Hospitals. In the days of Malcolm Canmore, and for many years afterwards Scotland was nearly as much overrun with lepers as some eastern countries, and hospitals were erected by the Church. Pope Alexander III in 1170, for instance decreed as follows: - “Seeing that it is very remote from Christian piety that those who seek their own and not the things of Jesus Christ, do not permit the lepers who cannot cohabit with the sound or meet in the church with others to have churches or burial-places of their own, nor to be assisted by the ministry of a priest, of their own, we ordain that these lepers be permitted to have the same without any contradictions.” As a rule chapels were connected with the hospitals. Just a little beyond the St Leonard’s factory of to-day (site of little Asda) we come to the site of -

CHAPEL AND HOSPITAL
The chapel and hospital, which was dedicated to St Leonards. It is difficult to say when the Hospital was founded. It is the most ancient charitable institution in the parish of Dunfermline. The oldest of the records for the institution dates back to 1393 but in 1651 an entry appears which connects the Hospital with the days of Malcolm and Queen Margaret. Tradition says that the latter was the foundress and the probability is that traditions right. To object of the institution was the maintenance, of eight widows, each of whom was entitled to four bolls of meal, four bolls of malt, eight loads of coal (worth 4d per load), eight lippies of fine wheat, eight lippies of groats, fourteen loads of turf yearly with a chamber in the hospital. Pin-money to the extent of 2s a year was also at one time allowed.

(Advocates Library, MSS) ‘Gift of the Chaplanrie of Sanct Leonard grantit to Williame Wardlaw for all the dayis of his lyftyme, 8 March 1603.’ Upon referring to the MS, we find that there was some association between the chapels of St Leonard and of St John the Baptist at Garvock, a follows: - ‘the chaplanrie called St Leonard besyde Dunfermling found it in the chapellis of the hospital of St Leonard and Sanct Johne the baptyst (in) the paroch of Dunfermling and rentis of the said chaplanrie,’ two former priests of St Leonard’s chapel, viz Schir John Hill and Schir John Grant, also being named. [Dunf. Burgh Records by E. Beveridge. P.xxix]

St Leonard’s Chapel, an old note dated November 1779 states that “the walls of this venerable building wee entire, but they were tottering to their fall.” 1798 – An old note states that “the south wall and door-post of the Chapel, or Hospital of St Leonard’s fell to the ground, and thus came to an end this venerable institution. About the same time its burial ground was disused.”

Leper’s Bell

SPITTAL BRIDGE
The Spittal Bridge in Ruins. “11th December 1703, Ordains the bailies to take some skill’d men to visit the Case of the Spittle Bridge, in order to repair the ruins of it.”

The road on the south side of Bothwell Street where the road continues over the Lyne burn or rivulet of Garvock, or the Spittal burn named because it is contiguous to the old Hospital lands of St Leonards where an elegant bridge of one arch with stone pillar work on each side was built in 1811 and has the name of the Spittal brig. The road on the south side of the brig was named St Leonard’s Place because the east side of the road touched the Hospital lands of St Leonards. [Viagraphy Dunfermlynensis]

It has been supposed that there was no “Spittal-brig” before 1780, and that persons crossed the burn there on “stepping-stones.” It is, however, evident from this entry that there was a “Spittal-brig” as early as the year 1655 – (27 Feb. This day, (before the Session) ‘comperit marione broune, who deponit yt John Kellek, ruggit and puggit hir beneath the spittel-brig, and did caste hir doun twyse, yt she was forced to quyte her plaid and run away, the sd John was sharplie admonished on 13 March.) [Kirk Session Records P.44]

Toll-bars were first erected in 1790 at the Spittal. These tolls were small sums collected from everyone who passed the tollgates or toll house. [Old Dunf. By Mima Robertson P.122]

On the evening of Sabbath 5th July 1846 this district was visited by one of the most tremendous floods ever witnessed here. The rain fell, not in torrents, but in cataracts. Part of the Spittal Brig fell.” [Annals of Dunf. P.656]

A second bridge is being constructed at Spittal Brig. [Bygone Dunf. 1993 P.O.V.]
NOTE: - A massive supermarket complex, which would employ a considerable number of workers, is likely to be built on the site formerly occupied by St Leonard’s Works. (Opened 16.5.1975).

[Dunf. Press 6.10.1972]
ST CATHERINE

Dr Ross as a good Protestant is not to be numbered among the worshippers of saints, even although on the eve of the festival day of St Catherine, the patron saint of libraries, learning and philosophers, he gave notice of a motion for the building of a great library on the site familiar to all Dunfermline people as St Catherine’s Wynd. St Catherine also figures in naglilogical records or the aurea legends as the type of virginal purity. It is thus she is recognized by Longfellow in his Evangeline when Basil the blacksmith’s pitying the maiden whose life has been cruelly surrendered from that got, his son to whom she had plighted her troth in perfect love, counseled her to accept another lover saying –

“Thou are too far to be left to braid St Catherine’s tresses.”

It is not, however as a Christian Artemis or Diana “the modest, spotless goddess,” but rather as a Christian Athene or Minerva, the patron of wisdom and art, that St Catherine is known; and without accepting the extravagant stories invented in an ignorant age to justify her canonization, one may yet – in view of the homage to be paid to literature and learning of which she was a devoted lover – regard her as one of the “The dead but accepted sovereigns, who still rule, our spirits from their urns.”

THE STORY OF CATHERINE.

Catherine was a virgin of royal descent who lived in Alexandria. The Emperor Maximin loved her, and wished to possess her. She steadfastly rejected his overtures, and thus increased the hatred of the autocrat. Having at a sacrificial feast, appointed by the Emperor in 307, publicly confessed herself a Christian, she was put to death after having endured the torture of the toothed wheel – an instrument like a chaff-cutter. Hence the name “St Catherine’s Wheel,” a sort of fire work, or in architecture a wheel-window or a rose-window with radiating divisions. Before she was subjected to the torture of the wheel, she was visited by fifty heathen philosophers sent by the Emperor to convert her in prison, but so skilled was she in argument and eloquence that she made the philosophers believe in her belief and won them to the Christian faith. Thus it was she, as a representative of the Christian church, became the patroness of philosophers, libraries, and learned institutions.

Some merciless critics of the Christian legends have suggested that the mental gifts and invincible devotion associated with the Catherine of the
opening of the fourth century were really derived from Hypatia, who at the end of the same century and the beginning of the next made for herself a foremost name in philosophy, attracting to her school in Alexandria students from all parts of the east, but arousing the mortal enmity of Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria. “With his connivance, if not at his investigation, certain savage monks from the Nitria desert, headed by one Peter, the reader, attacked Hypatia in the streets as she was returning from her lecture room, dragged her room her chariot, hurried her to the Casareum (then a church), there stripped her naked, then hacked her to death with oyster shells, after which she was torn to pieces, and her limbs carried to a place called Cilnars and there burnt to ashes.” Charles Kingsley found his story Hypatia (which appeared in 1853) on the later version. [Dunf. Journal 3.12.1904]

**THE CHURCH LEGEND.**

The Rev. Dr Stonghton, in his “Golden Legends of Olden Times,” thus described the legend on the strength of which Catherine was given a place among the Saints with the 25th of November as her festival day:-

St Catherine with her four wheels full of sharp spikes emblem of the torment she endured is familiar to all who are versed in legendary art. She was one of the richest and noblest ladies of Alexandria, and was renowned for great learning, that city being famous for its schools and libraries. The tyrant Maximin falling in love with her, wished she would live with him; this she felt determined not to do. He sent her into banishment. A long story is told of her being a king’s daughter, and how she resolved to marry, no other who was not worthy of her. To this end she consulted her lord and counselor, who said that such a husband as she desired there never was and never would be. A hermit received a message from the Virgin, who meant that Catherine should be married to her only Son Jesus Christ, whereupon she was carried up into heaven, and saw the Virgin, who presented her to the Lord.

Jesus betrothed Himself to her with a sacred ring. The Emperor notwithstanding, resolved to have her and when refused commanded her to be cast into a dungeon, which became filled with light and fragrance. She was sentenced to be broken on the wheel, when fire consumed the instruments of torture, and she was beheaded. After her death she was carried to the top of Mount Sinai, where the angels buried her. Poets and painters have delighted in the picturesque legend, but some learned men are ashamed of it.

Butler says: - “Her acts are so much adulterated, that little use can be made of them.” He quotes with approval the words of an Archbishop respecting Catherine’s translation. “As to what is said that the body of
this saint was conveyed by angels to Mount Sinai, the meaning is that it was carried by the monks of Sinai to their monastery, that they might devoutly enrich their dwelling with such treasure. It is well known that the name of an angelic habit was used for a monastic habit, and that monks, on account of their heavenly purity and functions, were anciently called angels.” This is a rationalistic kind of dealing with legend, which would explain away a good many of them. As to this translation of Catherine, it is most likely a dream, or simply a nortical invention. The whole story reads like a fable, but, after all, here is a touch of spiritual beauty in the idea of a soul being wedded to Christ, though not after the fashion described in the legend.

The union of a soul to Christ, under the image of a betrothal or marriage, appears both in the Old Testament and the New; and it seems to have been an idea much in favour with legendary author. An instance of it is founded in a later legend, that of a Sultan’s daughter. She walked in her father’s garden, gathering bright flowers full of dew, wondering more and more who was the Master of the flowers. In my heart she said ‘I love Him, and for Him would leave my father’s palace to labour in His garden.’ Jesus stood before her window. She opened the door. He said, ‘I am the Master of the flowers. My garden is in Paradise, and if thou wilt go with Me, thy bridal garment shall be of bright red flowers.’ Then he took from his finger a golden ring, and asked the Sultan’s daughter if she would be His bride. So runs the story in Longfellow’s “Golden Legend.”” [Dunf. Journal 3.12.1904]