

DUNFERMLINE ABBEY

From
HISTORIC HAUNTS OF SCOTLAND

BY ALEX MACLEHOSE 1936

Five miles north-west of North Queensferry, Fife.

The following passage, to the top of page 331, is taken, by permission, from the article by Professor T. H. Bryce on 'The Skull of King Robert the Bruce,' Scottish Historical Review (January 1926)

In the year 1916 Dr Macgregor Chalmers, excavating under the floor of the ruins of the Norman nave, discovered the foundations of an early Saxon church. It consisted of a western tower, a small nave, and a rather larger choir with eastern apse. This was the eleven-century church of Queen Margret dedicated to the Holy Trinity. It was replaced by, or rather incorporated in, a much larger church begun under Alexander I, continued under David I and consecrated in 1150. This twelfth-century church of David I consisted of the Norman nave we still see, and of a Monk's Choir which, kest doun in 1560, now lies under the modern church of 1821. There was a central tower and north and south transepts. The choir had an apsidal ending and two aisles. In the thirteenth century this choir, after the prevailing fashion, was extended eastwards. The apse was done away with, and a Chapel, rectangular in form, now occupied the eastern termination of the church. To this the bones of St Margaret and also, it is believed of Malcolm III were translated with great pomp in 1250. A new aisle was added to the choir on its northern side in the fourteenth century. There was no fresh consecration of the thirteen-century additions. A papal decision of 1249 decreed that this was not required in view of the fact that the walls of the church in great part perdured in their original condition (*pro maiori parte in pristino statu perdurent*). That the walls referred to were those of the choir, and not as Henderson and others have reasoned of the nave, can hardly be doubted.

It is certainly known that Dunfermline was the last resting-place of Queen Margaret and Malcolm III and of a number of their successors, but the almost complete destruction of the old choir, and its final submergence under the modern nineteenth-century church, together with the disappearance or removal of any monuments or inscribed slabs that may have existed, has left only the site of the shrine of St Margaret beyond the range of doubt or argument.

Queen Margaret as laid in the year 1093 before the high altar of the early Saxon church. The bones of Malcolm III which lay for many years at Tynemouth, were removed by Alexander I and placed near the same altar, but rather further eastward to the north the grave of his queen. Here, too, Edward, Edgar, and Alexander I, their sons, were buried, and thence in 1250 the remains of St Margaret were translated to the shrine in the eastern Chapel. Five graves were met with in the course of Dr Macgregor Chalmers' explorations, and stone coffins found here at other times are exhibited in the church.

When the new twelfth-century church was constructed the high altar of the old church became the rood altar, place before the rood screen and rood loft of the new church, and hence a certain confusion occurs regarding the sites of the royal interments as defined in the old chronicles . . .

All the royal tombs later than 1150 must have been located in the choir of the twelfth-century church. The first to be laid here was David I in 1153. John of Fordun says `He was buried in state in the pavement before the high altar of the church of the Holy Trinity at Dunfermline which first founded by his father and mother, had been added to in property and buildings by his brother Alexander while he himself also had loaded and endowed it with more ample gifts and honours; and he was laid here at a good old age, beside his parents and brothers.` The high altar here mentioned was that of the Church of David's time, not that of the original church of Malcolm and Margaret.

The end of the year 1165 saw Malcolm IV buried beside his grandfather. `The most godly King Malcolm fell asleep in the Lord at Jedworth; and his body was brought, by nearly all the prominent persons of the kingdom, in great state, to Dunfermline. . . It rests interred in the middle of the floor, in front of the high altar, on the right of his grandfather David.`

William the Lion, who succeeded to the throne of his brother Malcolm, died on December 4th 1214, and was buried accordance with his own directions on the church of the Monastery of Arbroath `which he had himsel caused to be built up from he very foundations, to the honour of God and St Tomas the Martyr, Archbishop of Canterbury`. The next monarch Alexander II, was also laid at the place of his own adoption on the Abby Church of Melrose on August 8th 1249. The succeeding Scottish King, Alexander III, was buried at Dunfermline. He died in 1286, so that 120 years had elapsed since the interment of Malcolm IV, and meantime the eastward extension of the choir and the construction of the chapel for St Margaret's shrine had been completed. A question next arises as to the position of the high altar in the rearranged choir. In the earlier apsed choir it would occupy the line of the chord of the apse, and we can readily place the tombs of David I and Malcolm IV in the floor before it, marked perhaps by stone slabs or brasses . . .

King Robert was the last male of the royal line to be buried within the church of Dunfermline, but Elizabeth his wife, Matilda his daughter, and Christina his sister, were all laid there, as was also Annabella, wife of Robert III. Three years after his master was entombed in the choir, the Regent, Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray, was buried on the spot which he himself had ordained in a charter of 1321, namely, in the Lady Chapel below the Conventual Church. His body therefore did not lie in the same area as those of the royalties.

Coming now to the position of the tomb of Robert the Bruce, we read in Barbour's poem:

With great fair and solempnite
Thai haue him had till Dunfermlyne
And hym solempnly erdit syne
And in a fair towme in the queyr.

Dunfermline Abbey was destroyed in 1560 by the Reformers and in 1818 it was decided to build a new church on the old site. During the excavations, workmen found in the original choir the tomb of a man from whose body the heart had been removed. From this fact, and from its position in the choir, it was assumed to have been the body of Robert Bruce, whose heart was buried at Melrose. It may perhaps be that of Alexander III, whose heart is stated in the *Scotichronicon* to have been laid to rest at Perth. Experts however, after sifting all the evidence, believe that he tomb discovered in 1818 was that of Bruce. More important is the truth enshrined in these words from his epitaph

HIC JACET INVICTUS ROBERTUS REX BENEDICTUS.

Each word - Rex, Invictus, Benedictus - is a quiet answer to that other, equally profound, epitaph in Westminster Abbey, MALLEUS SCOTORUM. p. 331

DUNFERMLINE ABBEY

FROM

**OLD CASTLES AND ABBEYS OF GREAT BRITIAN
AND IRELAND**

The ancient monastery continued till the Reformation, when its revenue was estimated at £2,513 Scots. The last Abbot was George Durie who died in 1575, followed by Robert Pitcairn, Commendator, George Gordon, the sixth Earl of Huntly, who resigned in 1587. The Secretary of State to James VI was appointed commendator, after which the abbey was erected into a temporal lordship. It was perpetually annexed to the Crown in 1593.

Of this once magnificent structure the principal remains are: the western portion of the Abbey Church, which is still entire, and presents a noble specimen of the later Norman style, with lofty massive columns and circular arches, and a timber-frame roof; the south wall of the roofless refectory, in which is a range of nine lofty windows; the western gable of the refectory, with a handsome large window of seven lights, enriched with flowing tracery; and the two towers at the entrance, of which one, north of the gable, and crowned with a low pyramidal spire, is entire - and the other, south-west of the gable, and under which is a spacious gateway is partly a ruin. The great western doorway of the church, of receding arches enriched with zig-zag mouldings, resting on a series of massive columns with flowered capitals, is a beautiful specimen of the later Norman style; and the north porch, though externally of plainer character, combines in the interior numerous minutely elegant details.

In the Abbey of Dunfermline were interred the remains of Malcolm Canmore and his Queen, Margaret; his sons Edward, Edgar, and Alexander, David I, Malcolm IV, Alexander III, and many of the old nobility of Scotland.

In removing that portion of the Abbey on the site of which the new church was erected in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, several very large slabs were dug up, supposed to indicate the royal sepulchres. On taking away these stones, in 1819, among various other relicts of the ancient Kings was found the skeleton of Robert the Bruce, encased in two coverings of thin sheet lead round which was wrapped a shroud of cloth of gold, the whole encased in a strong coffin of oak, which had mouldered into dust. After due examination, and after a careful and scrutinising instigation of the minutest circumstances which fully proved the identity of the body, the bones were replaced in their natural position, and being wrapped in the original covering of lead, and deposited in the leaden coffin, into which melted pitch was poured, were then re-interred in the very spot in which they had been found, in the choir of the ancient

Abbey, and immediately under the tower of the present church. On the lid of the coffin is the inscription in raised letters *King Robert Bruce*, under which are the dates 1329 and 1819.

THE MODERN DUNFERMLINE ABBEY.

This edifice was begun in March, 1818, and completed in September, 1821. It is erected on the east of the original building, which forms the western porch or vestibule to the new church. It is of light ornate Gothic architecture with tall, handsome windows and has a fine square tower near the east end, one hundred feet high. On the summit of this tower, instead of a balustrade of the same architecture as the rest of the building, there are the four words, "King Robert the Bruce," one word on each of the four sides respectively, in capital letters of open hewn work, four feet in height and which can be read easily at a considerable distance. These are surmounted by royal crowns, and each corner is ornamented with a lofty pinnacle. This decoration is intended to designate the place of sepulture of Scotland's patriotic King, whose ashes repose immediately beneath - the tower standing on the site of the choir of the original Abbey. This, it appears, formed no part of the original design of the church, but was added in consequence of the discovery of Bruce's tomb, in the course of digging the foundation of the new church, and at the request of the Barons of the Exchequer, who desired some memorial of it.

The interior is much and universally admired for the simplicity, chasteness, and elegance of its form and ornaments. It is in the figure of a cross, as similar as could be supposed to that of the original Abbey Church, having two transepts near the eastern extremity, from the centre of which rises the high tower already mentioned, supported by four massive columns. These columns like the smaller ones upholding the roof, are fluted with Roman cement on the solid mason-work, and their capitals are ornamented with beautiful imitation of foliage. The ribs of the different arches and the decorations on the ceiling are in excellent taste; and the effect of the whole, from any quarter, but particularly from one of the gallery doors is grand and pleasing.

Underneath the tower is the pulpit paced at the head of Bruce's tomb, and having in front of sarcophagus, with marble tablet and inscription erected by the Barons of the Exchequer as a further means of indicating and commemorating the spot which encloses the remains of the vindicator of Scotland's independence.

The dimensions of the church are as follows: Length within walls, 105 feet; breadth, 71 feet; length of the transepts 115 feet; breadth of transepts, 14 feet; height of the large and beautiful window at the east end of church, 34 feet; breadth of the same 16 feet.

The church, which cost nearly £11,000, is highly creditable to the genius of its architect, William Burns, Esq., but it is defective on account of the echo which is discernible when voices are heard, and also on account of the number of the seats which are obscured by the pillars of the building. (Part 1 Vol. 1 Oct. 1901)

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