
ST NICHOLAS KIRK, UPHALL



The ancient Church of Uphall, originally known as the “Church of Strabrok” and in more recent times as “Uphall North”, is dedicated to St Nicholas and is one of about fifteen Scottish churches in use today as Parish Churches belonging to the Norman and Transition period of church building i.e. the 12th and 13th century. Despite the fact that throughout the past 800 years there have been many alterations, some distinctive features of Norman Church building still remain. The South Doorway, the North Doorway, the Tower Arch, the lancet windows in the east wall of the Chancel, together with several other details, make it evident that in this church we have a building of great antiquity.

Briefly the history of the building is this. Here stands today the original church built around 1185 with Tower, Nave and Chancel, all going back to the days when building with stone first began in Scotland. This plan was common for the parish churches of the period, not only in Scotland but throughout north-western Europe. For instance, many 12th century churches in Denmark and Sweden are very like St Nicholas, Uphall both in size and shape but, unlike our church, most of them retain their original appearance - that is, whitewashed outside and plastered within. During the following century the Chancel was extended eastwards by 5 metres thus

enlarging it to about double its former size. Narrow pointed lancets lit this addition, but later, around 1500, more light was required and the present window just south of the communion table was inserted.

Although the present belfry dates from 1878, the top of the old bell-cote is still preserved at Houstoun House and the bell itself is of exceptional interest being one of the oldest in West Lothian. Inscribed on it is "In onore Sancte Nicholae Campana Ecclegie de Strabork Anno Dni MoVeIII" (In honour of St Nicholas the bell of the church of Strathbrock, the year of our Lord 1503. The founder's mark is the same as on the great bell of Linlithgow and there is also a shield bearing the quartered arms of Seton and Hay of Tullibody.

Early in the next century further additions were made. The first, in about 1620, was the Shairp, or Houston, Aisle to the south of the nave forming a South Transept and is a typical seventeenth century building, barrel vaulted and a pleasing addition to the church. An outside stair was added on the north side of the Chancel which led to the now demolished Buchan loft. This stair is dated AN.DO.1644 and was probably built by Sir Lewis Stewart who had bought Kirkhill House two years previously. In the 18th century there were further extensions including the Middleton Aisle on the north side of the nave, but these were swept away when, in 1876 an extensive portion of the North Wall was removed and a large North Transept formed, separated from the Nave by a three-bay arcade. In carrying out this addition, the purpose of which was to increase the seating accommodation of the church following a dramatic increase in population during the development of the local Shale Oil industry, an endeavour was made to maintain the Norman style of the original church.



As completed in 1878 the interior now showed little of its ancient character, with two lofts or galleries at the east and west ends of the nave, the two lancet windows built up and the lower portions of the walls clad in wooden panelling, thus concealing many of the original features. In 1937, a comprehensive renovation was begun, initiated by the minister, the Rev. William Crawford, and supervised by A. Lorne Campbell as architects on behalf of the General Trustees of the Church of Scotland. This work, designed to expose the medieval features of the building, was largely carried out by voluntary labour within the parish. It included the removal of the east and west galleries or "lofts", and opened up the previously hidden 12th century Romanesque arch between the nave and the tower. Both the north and south doorways were revealed along with many other internal features and stonework during these essential repairs which necessitated removal of plaster, restoration of roof timbers and installation of new furnishings. The interior walls were comprehensively re-pointed during this re-furbishment and with further pointing of the entire exterior about 50 years later, serious deterioration of the fabric of the building was therefore completely arrested. The stained glass in the east lancet windows (re-instated in 1938 after the removal of the Buchan loft) dates from 1962. The large wooden cross was placed on the east wall in 1974 by Mr Tom Wilson and Rev. Tom Cuthell, minister from 1965 - 1976.

Although the church is now not restored to its original Norman state with white plastered interior and whitewashed exterior, the exposed stonework remains to prevent further deterioration and the burden of costly future maintenance. At the time of restoration it was thought that the exposed masonry brought a special, unique character to the church, much loved by congregations of the 2nd half of the 20th century and continuing in these early years of the 21st. Not least, as Rev. William Crawford emphasised in 1937, "every mouldering stone is a Chronicle" and plays its own part in the 800 year history of continuing worship in this important Scottish Church.

compiled from: "History of St Nicholas Kirk, Strathbrock" by Ian G Lindsay 1948

"Church Service Society Annual" 1944 - 1945

"The Old Kirk of Uphall -Restoration Fund Appeal" - 1938 by Rev. William Crawford