

DORNOCH CATHEDRAL: THE HIGH CHURCH OF CAITHNESS.

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This important church, whose septcentenary will be celebrated this summer, has been so maltreated by the well-meant "restoration" of 1835-7, that its ancient features have been largely obliterated, and what survives is concealed in such fashion by harling and plaster that it is not always easy to distinguish old masonry from new.

The diocese of Caithness, including all Scotland north of the Dornoch Firth, was founded by David I. Originally its cathedral centre was at Halkirk (High Church), in the remoter or Norse part of the diocese. The unwisdom of this choice was evidenced in the savage treatment received by two of the early prelates at the hands of the half-Viking populace, who in 1201 blinded Bishop John and cut out his tongue, and in 1222 roasted his successor, Bishop Adam, to death on his own kitchen fire. Accordingly, Bishop Gilbert de Moravia (1223-45), by whom the reorganisation of the see was effected, removed its High Church to Dornoch—a place which, already possessing popular sanctity through its association with Celtic St Finbar, had the additional advantage of being more in touch with Lowland influences.¹ Architectural evidence shows that the work of building must have commenced soon after Bishop Gilbert's advent in 1223.² In its complete state the church (see

¹ For the early history of the diocese see my *The Castle of Kildrumny: Its Place in Scottish History and Architecture*, pp. 40-7.

² The cathedral was sufficiently far advanced in 1239 to receive the bones of the murdered Bishop Adam, which were translated thither from Halkirk and interred with full solemnities—*Chronica de Mailros*, ed. J. Stevenson, p. 150.

plan, fig. 1) comprised nave of four bays, with aisles, transepts, choir, and a central tower. It was dedicated to the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but after-generations preferred to know it as St Gilbert's Church. Little documentary evidence is available with regard to the earlier history of the building. In 1291, Edward I. made a gift from the forest of Darnaway of forty seasoned oaks for the fabric of the church.¹

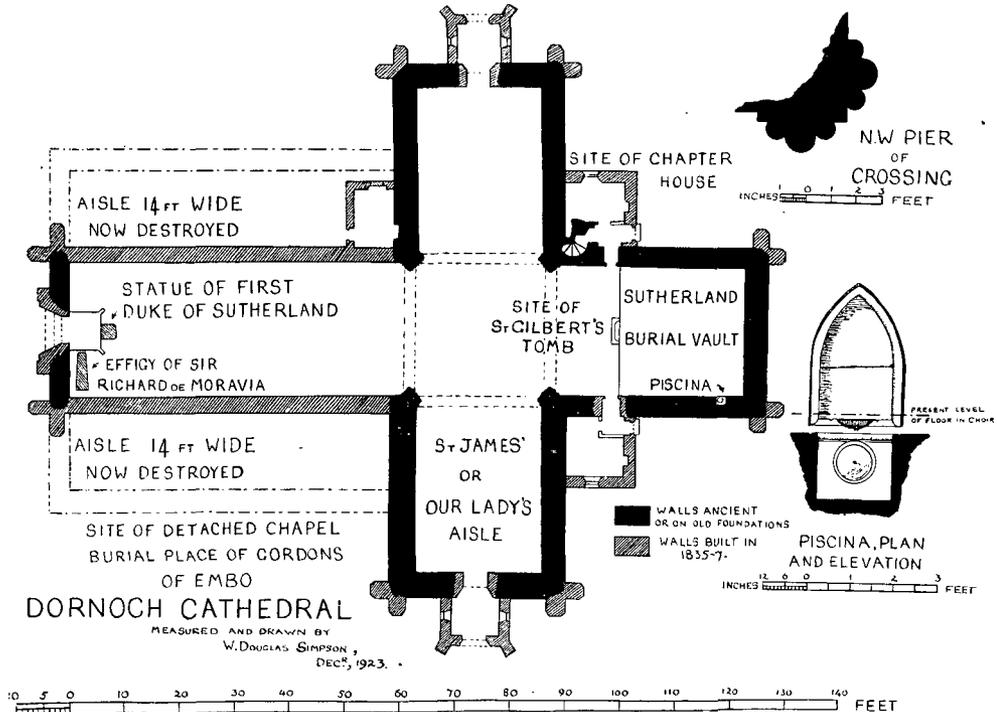


Fig. 1. Dornoch Cathedral: Plan and Details.

In 1570, the town of Dornoch was stormed and given to the flames by the Master of Caithness and the wild Mackays of Strathnaver. The cathedral was wholly burned except the tower, in which the burghers held out for a week. On this occasion the tomb of St Gilbert, who was buried beneath the crossing at the entrance to the choir, was broken open and his bones scattered.² Further damage was done to the ruins by a great storm on the night of "Gunpowder Treason," 5th November 1605,

¹ *Rotuli Scotiae*, vol. i, pp. 5-6.

² Sir Robert Gordon, *Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland*, pp. 156-7.

which blew over the north arcade of the nave.¹ Between 1614 and 1634, under the Caroline episcopacy, the cathedral was partly repaired, the choir and transepts being re-roofed, while the ruined nave was partitioned off and abandoned to decay.² In 1728 the present steeple was built.³ In 1775 a grant of £300 was obtained from Exchequer towards the repair of the church, and thereafter lofts were introduced in the choir and south transept, doors reached by outside stairs being hacked through the ancient walls. The roof was ceiled, and a wooden floor put in at a higher level.⁴ The condition of the church as thus restored is shown in an engraving by William Daniell, dated 1813,⁵ while the ruined nave is illustrated by Charles Cordiner in 1795.⁶ So matters remained until 1835-7, when the cathedral received a thorough restoration according to the ideas of the time. The nave was rebuilt without aisles, the remains of which, including the noble south arcade shown by Cordiner, were complacently cleared away. The other portions of the church were thoroughly repaired, refaced, and the whole brought to a smug uniformity by a liberal application of tame ashlar, harling, plaster-work, and yellow-wash. A mock vaulted ceiling in stucco was introduced in all four parts of the church. In the chancel a burial vault was contrived for the Sutherland family.⁷

As a result of these operations, the only conspicuous fragments of ancient work now visible in the interior of the church are the four great piers and bearing arches of the tower (fig. 2). The piers are square on plan, uniting with the adjoining walls on two faces, and having on each of the others a cluster of three half-engaged shafts, one large central one flanked by two smaller ones. The central shafts (as now coated with plaster and yellow-wash) are 14 inches in diameter, the lateral ones 7 inches. The square arris of the pier emerges between the two clusters. These shafts carry bell-capitals, rising from a rolled astragal into a square form corresponding to the abacus, whose lower edge is turned off in a broad splay.⁸ Over the large middle shafts the square parts of the bells and the abaci are slightly keeled centrally. All these impost

¹ Sir Robert Gordon, *Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland*, p. 255.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 309-10, 346; Sir William Fraser, *The Sutherland Book*, vol. i. pp. 222-3, vol. ii. pp. 16, 339.

³ H. M. Mackay, *Old Dornoch: Its Traditions and Legends*, pp. 94-5. Mr Mackay thinks that the present spire dates only from the restoration of 1835-7, but it is clearly shown in Daniell's engraving of 1813.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-3.

⁵ Reproduced in *The Sutherland Book*, vol. i. p. 13.

⁶ *Remarkable Ruins and Romantic Prospects of North Britain*, vol. ii.

⁷ For the restoration see *Old Dornoch*, pp. 137-42; also Hugh F. Campbell in *Trans. Aberdeen Ecclesiological Soc.*, 1891, pp. 39-41.

⁸ The effect in appearance, though not structurally, has something of the character of the double impost so often observed in early Byzantine architecture.

mouldings, from astragal to abacus, are continued round the square edge of the piers. The four pointed bearing arches are of two orders. The inner order, rising from the central shaft, has a plain flat soffit chamfered at the angles, the splayed surfaces thus formed carrying

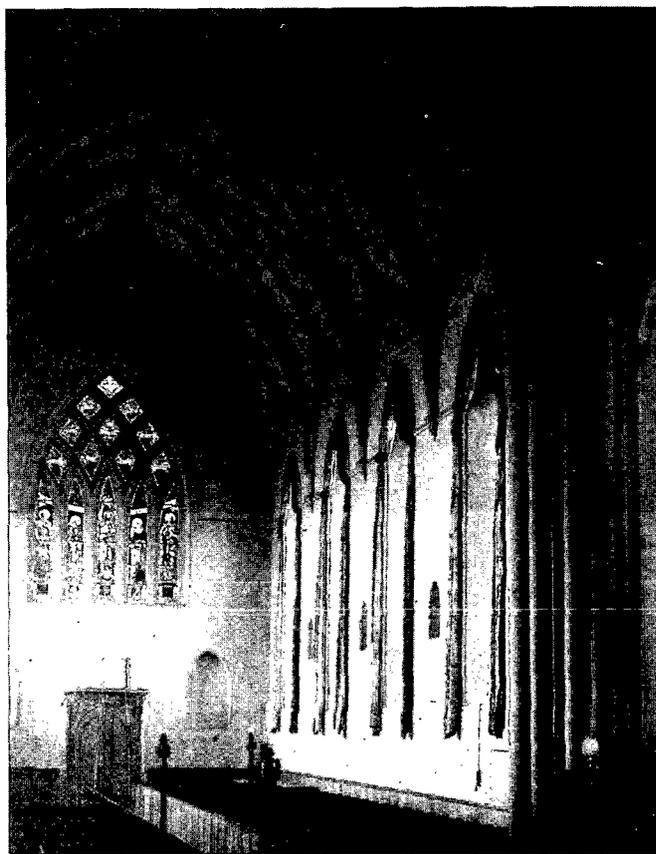


Fig. 2. Dornoch Cathedral: North-west Pier of Crossing, and West Window of Nave.

sharply-pointed quirked bowtells. The outer order, rising from the lateral shafts, has similar bowtells flanked by hollow mouldings. Modern pavement conceals the bases of the piers.

The tower carried by these piers and arches is now of two floors, the upper one being at the parapet level and beneath the broach spire. A newel stair, 2 feet 2 inches wide, placed in a semicircular tower in the angle between the choir and the north transept, leads up to the

tower. It has been thought that this stair is modern,¹ but the architectonic evidence does not support this view. The stair is constructed partly in the thickness of the choir and transept walls immediately behind the adjoining pier. Once the great tower was built, any subsequent attempt to dig out the masonry here in order to provide a stair would have resulted in a catastrophe; nor would there have been any reason for such an operation, as a stair could easily have been built entirely outside. The whole character of the newel stair is ancient, and on the outside of the circular tower, near the top, are visible weathered dressed stones, wrought to the curve, of a character totally different from the tame ashlar-work of 1835-7. Bishop Pococke, who visited the cathedral in 1760, has left us a short description of it as it then stood, in which he makes a curious mistake in describing the "eastern part" as ruined and the "body or nave" as still in use.² In Scotland more usually it was the choir which was abandoned—a fact which doubtless led Pococke into error about Dornoch, where the converse took place. Under this misapprehension, Bishop Pococke describes a round staircase tower at the "south-west angle of the middle part"; and, as it is clear he had the church turned round about in his mind, the stair referred to is obviously that now existing in the north-east corner. It has fifty-three steps, and thereafter a modern straight stair in wood leads to the lower floor of the tower. The staircase (fig. 3) has a flat leaded roof and is lit by pointed windows.

The tower measures about 23 feet square within walls about 3 feet thick. In the lower floor, each face has a large oblong bay narrowing outwardly to a pointed window, with a plain outer splay having a fillet round the exterior. The upper floor, at the springing of the spire, is a little above the level of the ancient floor here, which is indicated by rough corbels. Below these are the springers of massive splayed ribs spanning the tower from east to west in order to strengthen the floor. The masonry of the tower is much obscured, but seems to be partly-coursed rubble with dressed quoins in freestone. On the inside there is a course of freestone ashlar work about 2 feet 6 inches above the lower floor. Round the spire (fig. 3) is an allure walk 2 feet broad, paved uniformly with flat stone flags and protected by a parapet about 3 feet 6 inches high, having a moulded cope without embrasures. There are corner bartisans similarly finished. The parapet is borne by a plain

¹ *Old Dornoch*, pp. 108, 140.

² *Bishop Richard Pococke's Tours in Scotland*, ed. D. W. Kemp, p. 168. Curiously enough, the same mistake is made by Cordiner, who describes the ruined part as "the altar end," and, following Cordiner, by Capt. J. Henderson, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Sutherland*, 1812, plate facing p. 167.

corbel-table of single members in two breaks, and continuous corbellings carry the bartisans. Plain grooved runnels are provided for the drainage, but are not now in communication with the roadway. Originally the latter would no doubt be paved in the usual fashion, gutter stones discharging by the runnels being set alternately with stones wrought to a central ridge and sloping on either side.

In the west gable of the nave is a large window (fig. 2) of five pointed lights beneath a pointed general arch. Unfoliated intersecting tracery

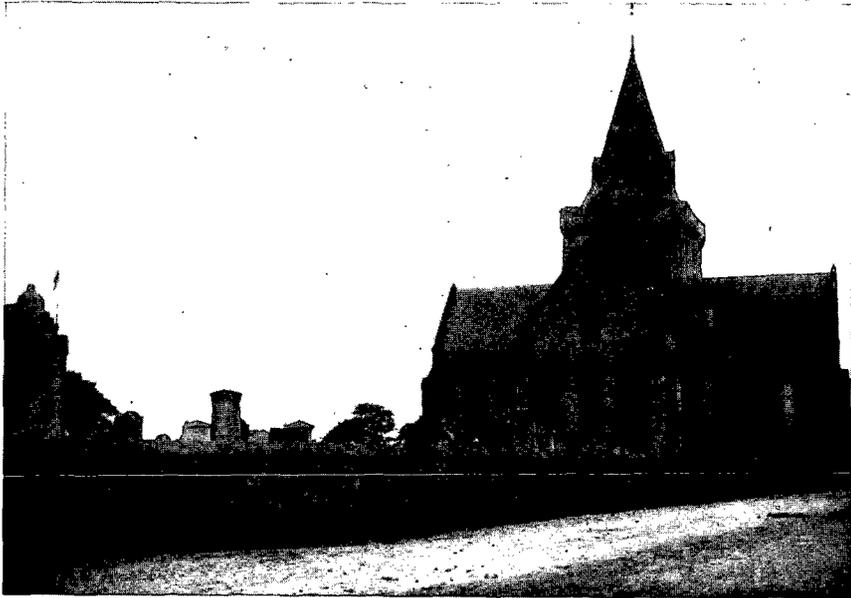


Fig. 3. Dornoch Cathedral: View of East End.

(The tower of the Episcopal Palace is visible to the left.)

fills up the general arch, and is formed by the mullions branching into two, each branch being continued archwise up to the window-head. Exteriorly and within, the mullions and tracery carry a half-engaged central roll set on a flat surface flanked by shallow hollows. The same mouldings are continued on the jambs and general arch. A window with five lights and basket tracery of the same type is shown here in Cordiner's engraving, but the style of dressing and appearance of the stonework of the present window suggest that it was rebuilt at the restoration. At that time certainly it was shortened by the introduction of a porch in the lower part of the gable, and its original proportions,

as shown by Cordiner, were thus entirely destroyed. Below it, on the inside, a marble tablet bears the inscription:—

THIS
 ANTIENT CATHEDRAL
 HAVING
 FALLEN INTO DECAY AND RUIN
 WAS RE-EDIFIED
 DECORATED AND RESTORED
 TO RELIGIOUS SERVICE
 BY ELIZABETH
 DUCHESS AND COUNTESS OF SUTHERLAND
 IN THE YEARS
 MDCCCXXXV, VI, & VII.
 THE LORD IS IN HIS HOLY TEMPLE
 PSALM XI.

At present the transept gables show each a window of three pointed lights with a circular window above and a porch below. So far as the north gable is concerned, this was not the ancient arrangement, which is shown in Daniell's drawing and consisted of two pointed lights with a third above. Three lights with a fourth above, all most beautifully proportioned, are preserved in the east gable of the church (fig. 3), which is very dignified.¹ An offset round the interior walls of the chancel, and continued round the transepts, might be thought to indicate the level of the old work retained at the restoration. On the other hand, there seems to be ancient rough-cast masonry of small-work exposed through the harling on the outside north wall of the choir at a higher level. The offset inside is about 7 feet 6 inches above the present floor level in the transepts, and 5 feet above the present floor level in the chancel. Both floors have been raised, the chancel floor being above the Sutherland burial vault.

Near the east end in the south wall of the chancel a fenestella contains the piscina (see measured drawing, fig. 1). The niche has a pointed arch 2 feet 10 inches high, and is 1 foot 9 inches wide. Its moulding is a half-engaged roll set on a chamfer, and is continued down the jambs and also along the sill of the piscina, which is below the paving of the present floor. The basin, set centrally, is 10½ inches in diameter, rather shallow, with a medial drain, and is surrounded by a flattish roll moulding. On

¹ It is perhaps worth noting that the same arrangement is found in the chapel window at Kildrummy Castle, also built by Bishop Gilbert. But it would be unwise to attach too much significance to this similarity, for at Kildrummy the upper window is a mere light to the roof-timbers, and, moreover, in its present state is not original work. See my *Castle of Kildrummy*, pp. 88-90, 129; also *Proceedings*, vol. liv. p. 138.

the west jamb, inside the arch, a fragment of older sculptured work, much weathered, has been used.

For the lost aisles of the nave, which were 14 feet wide,¹ the only authorities seem to be Cordiner's picture and the brief notes of Bishop Forbes and Bishop Pococke. The latter says: "In the eastern [*sic*] part, now uncovered, there are four arches on each side supported by round pillars with a kind of Gothic Doric capital." Bishop Forbes, who visited Dornoch on 3rd August 1762, speaks of the "West End" as "ruinous; only the Gable End and the two side Walls, with the 5 South Pillars, including the two in strong Basso Relievo in the two Gable-ends, are still standing."² The south arcade as shown by Cordiner answers to these descriptions, plain cylindrical piers with square bases carrying on simple capitals plain pointed arches having splayed mouldings—all very like the nave arcade (1424-40) of St Machar's Cathedral, Aberdeen. The clerestory windows were square-headed with round rear-arches, and the aisle windows, apparently of a single light, had plain round arches. At the west end of the aisle was a plain pointed door. One pier of the north arcade is shown by Cordiner as still erect, and is of multangular form, with a late capital.

At the eaves all round the building are grotesque gargoyles. It has been suggested that these are modern,³ but except for the four pairs beneath the skew-putts of the gables, and one on the choir nearest the round staircase, they are evidently mediæval. Their whimsical effectiveness and vigour contrast utterly with the docile character of all the restoration work. The five modern ones are quite different in treatment, and lack the spirit of the others; they are also less weathered.

The interior measurements of the church are as follows:—length, 123 feet; breadth over transepts, 89 feet; length of chancel, 34 feet; breadth, 23 feet 9 inches; length of transepts, 30 feet 8 inches; breadth, 23 feet 7 inches; length of nave, 60 feet 10 inches; breadth, 24 feet 10 inches.⁴

Within the church, at the west end of the nave, is preserved the effigy, formerly in the choir, of Sir Richard de Moravia, brother of Bishop Gilbert. He fell fighting against the Norse at the battle of Embo, about 1245.⁵ The effigy (fig. 4) is a fine though mutilated specimen of the sepulchral art of the thirteenth century. Sir Richard is shown in recumbent posture, clad *cap-à-pie* in the armour of the period. His

¹ *Origines Parochiales Scotiae*, vol. ii. part ii. p. 623.

² Dr J. R. Craven, *History of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Caithness*, p. 236.

³ *Old Dornoch*, p. 143.

⁴ Mr Campbell (*Trans. Aberdeen Ecclesiological Soc.*, 1891, p. 41) gives the height of nave and chancel as 45 feet, and that of the spire as about 120 feet.

⁵ *Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland*, pp. 32-3.

hauberk, of which the links have not been sculptured, is covered with an ample surcoat, reaching in graceful folds to just below the knee. The neck and armholes are wide, and the latter are prolonged downwards to a point. The border seems to be a plain ribbon. A close camail, drawn up over the chin, envelops the head, the upper part of which is broken off. On the left side, just below the break, is a raised fillet which may be a head-band or the rim of a basinet. The features are wholly defaced. The right arm is broken off just below the shoulder; the left was concealed beneath a shield, now almost destroyed. The right leg, of which



Fig. 4. Dornoch Cathedral : Effigy of Sir Richard de Moravia.

the lower part is gone, has been crossed over the left leg, and has a plain garter below the knee. The left leg is complete save for part of the foot, which is garnished with the knightly prick-spur. Round the waist of the figure is the sword belt, showing a series of clasps or buckles. It droops to the sword, which lies from right to left across the wearer's middle. The sword is now much battered, but has a straight blade, downward quillons, and a heavy globular pommel. A small plain cushion supports the knight's head, and his feet rest on the back of a lion *couchant*. The effigy, which measures 6 feet 11 inches long, is in freestone, wrought with great spirit. The sarcophagus, rough-hewn out of a single block of freestone, is 7 feet long, 2 feet 4 inches wide at the head, 1 foot 9 inches wide at the foot, and 1 foot 4 inches in height.

The great piers and arches of the crossing are undoubtedly Bishop Gilbert's work, and date from the early thirteenth century, or soon after his consecration to the diocese in 1223. Their clustered shafts and the bold pointed, unfileted rolls and deep cavettos of the pointed arch-mouldings are typical of the fully-developed, but still early First Pointed style; while at the same time the square abaci retain the influence of the preceding Norman style. All this work is bold in conception, and the handling is masterly—fully equal to the best Transitional work anywhere else in Scotland. Bishop Gilbert would take a close personal interest in the building operations, and Sir Robert Gordon tells us, how "all the glasse that served this church when it was built, was maid by Sainct Gilbert his appoyntment beside Sideray [modern Cyderhall] two myles by west Dornogh."¹

In substance the tower above may belong to the same period; but the parapet, with its bartisans resting on continuous corbels, is clearly much later work. This part of the tower was no doubt altered at the time of the Caroline restoration. The coping of the parapet may have been erected, in place of earlier merlons and embrasures, when the steeple was rebuilt in 1728. All these features are shown exactly as now in Daniell's engraving. The clock is dated 1897.

The continuous, flattish mouldings of the piscina, and a certain want of vigour in its treatment, suggest a late pre-Reformation date; and the same inference may be drawn from the tracery of the west window, which is of a common fifteenth- or sixteenth-century pattern. This fact, together with the late character of the nave arcade as illustrated by Cordiner, strongly hints that the body of the cathedral was not completed until long after Bishop Gilbert's time.²

All the rest of the building seems to be modern, or modernised beyond recognition, and is in the worst possible style of nineteenth-century anæmic Gothic. Any other ancient masonry that may exist is concealed beneath the exterior harling and the liberal coats of plaster

¹ *Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland*, pp. 6, 31. This statement of Sir Robert is of some interest in view of the suggestion made by Mr F. C. Eeles, F.S.A.Scot., that mediæval glass was probably not made in Scotland (*Proceedings*, vol. xlix. p. 91).

² A bond of maurent, given by William Sutherland of Duffus to Alexander Gordon, Master of Sutherland, dated 4th September 1529, assigns as a penalty to be paid by Sutherland or his heirs for breaking "ony punt of the premisses," a sum of £500, "to the operation and edification of the cathedrall kirk of Cathness" (*The Sutherland Book*, vol. iii. p. 94). A date about this period would well suit the style of the nave arcade and west window. But, on the other hand, the sum might have been payable to a general repair or maintenance fund, such as that provided for by Bishop Gilbert in his foundation charter. An earlier bequest of the same nature occurs in 1456, when Alexander Sutherland of Dunbeath granted a capital sum for the repairs of St Gilbert's Church (*Origines Parochiales Scotiæ*, vol. ii. part ii. p. 607). In a deed of Bishop Robert Stewart, dated 1557, repairs latterly done to the cathedral are mentioned (*Ibid.*, p. 610). The cumulative evidence certainly suggests that building was in progress in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

and yellow-wash which have been applied to all the internal walls, giving a jaundiced aspect to the inward views of the edifice. Yet even in its mutilated degradation Dornoch Cathedral is still a fine church, chiefly owing to the very beautiful proportions which the modernised building has inherited from its mediæval predecessor. The martial tower, with its battlement, bartisans, and broach spire, has a most effective and pleasing appearance. Despite its truncated condition there is dignity in the west window; and in the interior of the church, the grand massive piers, clustered shafts, and soaring, richly-moulded arches of the crossing form one of the noblest fragments of mediæval architecture extant in the north of Scotland.

I have to thank the Rev. Charles D. Bentinck, B.D., minister of the cathedral, for facilities of access to the building, for information on sundry points, and for causing the photograph at fig. 4 to be taken on my request. The photographs at figs. 2 and 3 were taken by the late Mr William G. Jamieson, to whose sister, Miss Elsie Jamieson, Aberdeen, I am indebted for permission to reproduce them. I have also to thank Mr William J. Adair Nelson, Aberdeen, for assistance in making the survey.

ADDITIONAL NOTE, APRIL 1924.

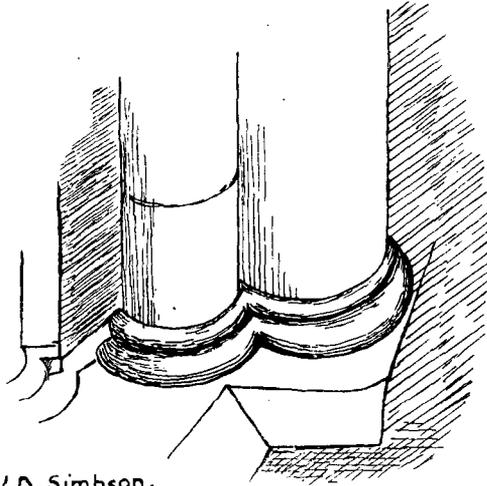
Since the foregoing account was drawn up, the Septcentenary Celebration Committee, on the Rev. Mr Bentinck's suggestion, has undertaken operations with a view to the exposure of so much of the ancient masonry as might have been spared by the "restorers" of 1835-7 beneath their lath and plaster surfacing. Interesting discoveries have thus been made, and I am indebted to Mr Bentinck for particulars embodied in the following note.

The work already completed comprises the laying bare of the piers and arches of the crossing and the lower part of the chancel walls. Beneath the plaster and ochre-wash the original masonry has everywhere been found in a satisfactory condition. The effect is distinctly good, and restores a measure of its ancient character to the church. The masonry of the piers, except the north-west one, was badly damaged about where the eighteenth-century lofts would have impinged upon them. This damaged stonework has now been carefully restored. Some of the stones in the south-west pier are weather-worn. The base of the north-east pier has been exposed, and is shown in the annexed illustration (fig. 5), from a drawing kindly furnished by Mr Bentinck. It will be seen that the mouldings are of good and early character, consisting of two rolled members separated by a "water-bearing" hollow. During the excavation of this base a dwarf-wall was discovered, running

out from the east and west sides of the base. It was probably the support of a former wooden floor, as the plinth on which the base rests, which is 5 feet square and built of dressed stone, has been cut into, apparently to make room for a sleeper-joist. This floor would have been above the original floor and under the present one. The piers are 27 feet in height, including the capitals, and the arch-mouldings, which were found intact beneath their ochreous incrustation, rise to a height of 47 feet above the original floor. A massive oaken beam was

found embedded in the masonry above the north transept arch. The piers are built of Dornoch sandstone,¹ and the capitals and arches are of sandstone from Embo. Numerous masons' marks are everywhere apparent.

The walls of the chancel are built of rubble like that of the Bishop's Palace, with dressed sandstone quoins. The part exposed extends to a height of from 6 to 8 feet all round the chancel. It has now been carefully pointed and finished off with a stone coping. In the south wall, at the modern door to the vestry, a built-up tomb-recess has been exposed. It measures 7 feet 6 inches



W.D. Simpson.

Fig. 5. Dornoch Cathedral: Base of North-east Pier of Crossing.

wide, and has been about 9 feet high above the present floor. The apex of the pointed arch had been cut away to make room for the windows above—whose modernity, in their present form, is thus established. Built into the exposed walls four memorials have been revealed. They are of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century date, and have been described in an article on Dornoch Cathedral published in the *Northern Times* of 20th March 1924, which contains an account of the above discoveries.

A stone tablet to St Gilbert, designed by Mr Alexander Carrick, A.R.S.A., Edinburgh, is to be placed in the choir.

¹ The quarry from which the stone is said to have been taken is still shown on the Links of Dornoch.