

# Dairsie Old Parish Church and the Question of Redundancy

*Jonathan Dowling*

*Dairsie Old Parish Church is a fascinating building with an interesting and lengthy history. The structure we see today was the creation of Archbishop John Spottiswoode of St Andrews and dates to the early 17th century. Once an impressive and important ecclesiastical building, witness to the theological debates after the Scottish Reformation, it has in recent years become redundant and largely forgotten, an empty shell with only distant memories of its former glory. It shares the problem of redundancy, of course, with many other church buildings, both in Scotland and elsewhere. With a new use apparently found for the church, is there light at the end of the tunnel?*

Six miles west of St Andrews, the church is located in open, rolling countryside and is surrounded by a small graveyard with 17th-19th-century table-tombs and gravestones (Fig 1). It was built in 1621 by Spottiswoode, and dedicated to St Mary. Historically, the parish of Dairsie was an important local centre of power, with a mormaer (estate manager or thane) in

the 11th century. There is evidence that earlier churches were located on the site of Dairsie Church from at least the 12th century. A church at Dairsie was granted as a gift of Arnold Bishop of St Andrews (1159–63). This church was given to the Augustinian priory of St Andrews in 1300 and was subsequently rebuilt by Spottiswoode (Lamont-Brown 2002, 79).

*Fig 1 – Dairsie Church from the north-east (photograph, Judy Dowling)*

Fig 2 – Dairsie Church, from the south (photograph, Judy Dowling)

A list of the houses of William Lamberton, Bishop of St Andrews 1297–1328, gives Dairsie amongst some ten residences outside St Andrews. Melgund and Monimail, medieval archbishops of St Andrews, resided there (Fawcett 1997, 90). The land at Dairsie belonged to the See of St Andrews, but was tenanted out to Lamont of Dairsie in 1550 and later sold to Spottiswoode. Dairsie Castle, located next to the church, was the meeting place of a parliament in 1335 and is said to have been occupied by John Spottiswoode when writing his *History of the Church and State of Scotland*. The latest castle structure was built in the 16th century, although it was ruinous until it was rebuilt in the mid-1990s as a private residence. Like its ecclesiastical neighbour, it has a lengthy history and complex site development, with the possibility of a rich and largely undisturbed archaeological

stratigraphy. Thus one can see the importance of this parish in general and the site of the church in particular.

The church was built 60 years after the 1560 Reformation, when John Rutherford was minister of Dairsie. In general, the earlier practice of ecclesiastical architecture was brought to a close by the upheaval in the church, but Dairsie was an exception. Spottiswoode himself was responsible for the design and he used a loose Church of England model for his church. This was resented by the Episcopalian Scots, reflecting the larger picture of resistance to the attempted ideological Anglicanisation of the Church of Scotland by Charles I (Hume 2005, 4–5). Described as an experimental church (Hume 2005, 4) and a prototype (Muir 1861, 121), Dairsie Church married Gothic and classical styles. It was considered by some

to be an attempt by Spottiswoode to introduce Anglican liturgical practices into Scotland (Walker and Ritchie, 1987). It has been compared to St Mary's of Auchterhouse, Forfar, which was built in 1630, and Michael Kirk in Elgin, built in 1705 (Muir 1861, 121).

The 'remarkable edifice' (MacGibbon and Ross 1892, 155) is a buttressed, rectangular building, four bays long by two bays wide, with sandstone ashlar walls (Fig 2). The bays are separated by three-stage buttresses which also feature on the corners. The entrance is in the western wall, with an ornate moulded arched doorway framed by classical pilasters (Fig 3). Above this are an inscription panel which states '*Iehovah, dilexi de corem domus tuae*' (Jehovah, I have loved the beauty of thy house) and Spottiswoode's initials and arms, with the date 1621. The tower, to the right of the doorway, juts out unusually, not to say awkwardly, at the south-west corner (there was no gable to support a central

location) and is heavily corbelled. It rises in two stages to a stone spire and has simple openings.

Each bay of the church features an interesting (especially for a Scottish parish church) Gothic, hoodmoulded pointed-arch window, with three trefoil-headed lights which feature large cinquefoiled plate tracery (RCAHMS 1933, 91). The plate tracery was restored by John Kennedy and John MacCulloch in 1835–7 (Gifford 1992, 169). A sill course is carried all the way around the building, rising up over the western doorway and a smaller blocked southern door. Under the cornice are several gargoyle spouts (Fig 4), which used to drain the original flat (or shallow-pitched) roof. The current piended (hipped) slate roof was built in 1794, significantly altering the church's appearance. The flat lead roof was originally contained within a small parapet, which may have supported small pinnacles over the buttresses (Pride 1990, 113).

Fig 3 – Dairsie Church, west doorway (photograph, Judy Dowling)



Fig 4 – Dairsie Church, gargoyle; cover illustration  
(photograph, Judy Dowling)

The interior of the church, now sadly largely vanished, was the first designed after the Reformation for the new episcopal church in Scotland. It featured a raised chancel with an altar, marked off by a solid wooden screen with the royal arms. All this was regarded as superstitious and removed in the 1650s by the Presbytery of Cupar. As MacGibbon and Ross eloquently sum up this event,

*'after two blasts of the Puritanic trumpet the place was changed into the bald condition in which it has since remained'* (1892, 156).

The church was in ecclesiastical use until 1968, after which the dwindling congregation united with the more conveniently located village church in Dairsie. The old parish church became a retreat for St Andrews University before becoming the store for a St Andrews-based museum. For the last ten years or so it has been empty, neglected and unheated. Its isolated location, lack of modern services, surrounding graveyard and large maintenance costs have thus far hindered plans to convert to housing or offices.

The lack of occupation and maintenance has led to a worrying degradation of the church's fabric. Numerous visits have revealed smashed windows, some boarded up, others not, fallen roof slates, a small tree growing out of the stonework of the turret, graffiti on the door and water damage to stonework caused by blocked and leaking pipes and guttering. Much more deterioration would render the church a danger to the public. There has even been talk of removing the roof to make it a structurally sound ruin, rather than waiting until it collapses.

## *The Question of Redundancy*

Sadly, such a fate is not uncommon. The second half of the 20th century witnessed the redundancy and neglect of many churches. There are numerous reasons behind this predicament. A glut of church buildings, dwindling congregations, a population move to urban centres and the expense of up-keeping an ageing building have all contributed. The number of church buildings in Scotland increased massively in the 19th century thanks largely to a number of key splits in the church and the emergence of different denominations, set against a backdrop of general population increase. Emerging religious groups needed a place to worship. Pastor Glas (the Glasites) built his original church in Dundee and the first Methodist church was built in 1772 in Arbroath. Seven years later the first Congregational church was constructed in Edinburgh by James Haldane. Roman Catholics were granted freedom of worship in 1793. There were also the Burghers and Anti-Burghers which became the Old and New Lights, among other small denominations and 'break-aways'. This complex picture was compounded by the dramatic split of the Church of Scotland in 1843. Most congregations were divided and created almost overnight the need for the doubling of church buildings in virtually every parish in Scotland to accommodate the new Free Church.

This diversification was followed by a number of important unions among denominations. The United Presbyterians, formed in 1847, joined the Free Church in 1900. The largest union came in 1929 when the Free Church re-united with the Church of Scotland. A large number of churches were now surplus to requirements, as congregations joined and smaller, increasingly unpopular groups disbanded. Further redundancy was caused by a growing trend to abandon church-going, especially in the later 20th century. The Church no longer has the pull it used to enjoy over the populace. This gradual social change led to smaller congregations without the financial resources to upkeep and maintain ageing, and often large, church buildings. Dwindling congregations have frequently united with their neighbours to create a single, larger and workable congregation, leaving a growing number of churches without a use.

Finding an alternative use for redundant churches is especially difficult. As the architectural historian Colin McWilliam rightly points out,

*'a church whose architectural value is based on function is, for that very reason, hard to convert*

*to other uses without loss of integrity*  
(Binney and Burman 1977, 55).

It is important a new use is quickly found for an empty church. This is usually an easier task in urban areas where more appropriate and feasible options are open to developers. The alternative, often to be seen in rural and remote areas, is leaving the building empty and boarded up, neglected and forgotten.

There are a variety of possible functions a church building can fulfil. They can be converted to flats or offices (ideal in town and city centres), converted to spacious, open-plan houses or a community use. Uses include museums, hall, meeting-house, gallery, playgroup, art studio or store. Ryehill Church in Dundee was re-developed into flats, while a church in West Regent Street in Glasgow is now a modern open-plan office used by a design company. Another option is to keep an important feature, such as a tower, and integrate it into a new building, demolishing the other parts. While not ideal, this at least preserves part of a church. Despite the options available to developers churches are still being demolished today. Structural faults, such as dry rot or subsidence often leave no other option, while in other cases the design of a building or its material construction leaves little scope for a re-use.

St James' Church in St Andrews was a corrugated iron structure and had an interesting history. When a new church was built to replace it, the whole building was moved a mile across town and relocated. It became a roller skating centre and cinema, before it became a store for local companies. A few years ago it was demolished to make way for a new block of flats. Its size, poor foundations and the materials used in its construction meant it could not be saved.

So what of Dairsie Church? Its isolated and rural location has limited its potential. Letting it fall into ruin would be a loss to Scottish architecture as well as the local community. But is this just an inevitability that is being played out in countless other villages and parishes in Scotland? In short, the answer may well be yes. But there may be hope yet for Dairsie Old Parish Church. It was recently sold to a group intending to use the building as a dance studio and art centre. Such a use would require little internal alteration and the building would be heated and maintained. The long-term success of the project is not clear, but one must hope it will work and safeguard the future of an important redundant church, rescuing it from demolition or ruin. Whether the extensive repair work

required can be carried out quickly and effectively remains to be seen, but the purchase is an optimistic step forward for the church and the community as a whole, and may lead to another interesting chapter in the building's history.

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