

THE CENTENARY BOOK OF
ST. JOHN'S, DUMFRIES

A HISTORY OF THE EPISCOPAL CONGREGATION IN DUMFRIES

by

JEAN S. MAXWELL

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CHAPTER X

MR McEWEN's successor, the Rev. John Richard Denham, came to Dumfries from a four years' curacy at St. Mary's (now the Cathedral Church of the Diocese), Glasgow. He was instituted on 17th June, 1883, just in time to launch on behalf of the Vestry, an appeal for funds for the building of a new School. The need was clamant, for the two rooms in St. David Street, ill-ventilated and without sanitation, now held one hundred and eighteen pupils. This was a state of affairs which did not commend itself to H.M. Inspector of Schools and made the withdrawal of the all-important Government grant something more than a probability. Moreover, the roll of the School was only about half that of St. John's Sunday School. The need for a larger, as well as a more up-to-date School was, therefore, obvious. Mr Denham's appeal was met in certain quarters with an immediate response, the first six contributions totalling no less than £413. But after this spectacular start the fund mounted but slowly and that only at the expense of much laborious collecting. Eventually, however, building was begun on a site in Rae Street and on 30th July, 1885 the new School was opened by Bishop Wilson. It consisted of a large hall with effective arrangements for heating, lighting and ventilating. This was to be the schoolroom and as such it was acclaimed by the local press as being "unsurpassed by any other in this locality". There were separate cloakrooms and lavatories for boys and girls who were also given separate entrances to the School and, in addition to a large playground, there were two concrete-floored rooms under the hall which the children were to use in wet weather.

Mr Denham in thanking the Bishop for his presence, made it quite clear that as in the past the Day School had been open to children of denominations other than

their own, so it would continue. He also intimated that the building would be used not only as a Day School but also as a Sunday School, a Mission Room, and a Guild Room. (ay) Conveniently situated, as it was, for both church and town-centre it would be a centre for much of the church's parochial work.

Mr Johnston of Cowhill, in a speech dealing mainly with the financial aspect of the undertaking, intimated that the site had cost £264 and that the estimated cost of the building was £1225, making a total cost of £1489. Subscriptions to date totalled £1079 and out of this £980 had been paid to the contractors, leaving a balance of £510 still due to them. To meet this they had only about £100 in the bank which left a deficit of £410. The furnishing of the School would require about £50 more, so they had about £460 to beg, borrow, or, as he put it, "wait for". The debt was finally cleared off by further donations and the proceeds of a Sale of Work held in the School in 1886. (az) Three years later an Infant Department was added at a cost of £500.

Choral Evensong on Christmas Eve, Guilds for the men, women, boys and girls of the congregation, a Penny Bank, a Football Team and a Church Magazine were instituted by Mr Denham, but the most popular innovation of all was the Congregational Soiree. Destined to become one of the truly great events of the St. John's Kalendar, this was instituted in Greyfriars' Hall on 3rd January, 1884 when five hundred people, including many non-Episcopalians, sat down to a sumptuous tea served by ladies of the congregation to the accompaniment of music on the organ. Then followed a musical programme interspersed with speeches from the platform, the most interesting from the historical standpoint being that by the Lay Representative, Mr Johnston of Cowhill. The congregation's chief sources of income were, he explained,

the seat-rents and offertories, which amounted to about £400 a year, then there were the endowments of £740, which yielded an annual revenue of £30; £65 a year was received as an equal dividend from the Representative Church Coun-

cil; and a parsonage assessed at £50, making a total of £545. (Applause.) Out of this £100 a year was paid to the late respected incumbent after his long and faithful services. (Cheers.) The expenses of the church would this year exceed £100, then there was the choir which cost about £70, making a total of £270, or about half the revenue, the remaining half going to the incumbent. There was a choir fund, but it barely sufficed to cover one-third of the expenses, and consequently the deficiency had to be borne by the incumbent. He thought no one would deny that of late the choir had been very greatly improved (Applause) and that improvement was solely due to their worthy incumbent, who had brought the choir to its present excellent state. (Applause.) Of course all present wished their services should be the best they could give to Almighty God, and everyone should therefore contribute as far as possible towards the fund, so that it might rest as lightly as possible upon the incumbent. (Applause.) Besides this there were three canonical offertories — the Home Mission, the Foreign Mission, and the Educational Scheme; and there were two offertories on behalf of the Dumfries and Galloway Infirmary and the Church. This year he was their Lay Representative on the Representative Church Council, and he wished to inform them that the accounts of the Council, which formerly closed on the 15th September, now closed on the 30th June; so that if the subscriptions to the Clergy Fund were not paid before the 30th June, there would be a great diminution in the amount of dividend paid to the clergymen, which would be a hardship to all concerned. He might mention that the congregation of St. John's had contributed very liberally towards that Fund. Hitherto they had sent £180 each year to the Representative Council; and this year the contributions to the Home and Foreign Missions had been much larger than in previous years, proving that they were good churchmen and churchwomen — that they were not congregationalists, but that they thought of congregations elsewhere and were ready to assist them when they could. (Applause.) In fact they gave three times more than they received. (ba)

Among those accompanying Mr Denham and Mr Johnston on the platform was the Rev. J. Farquhar,

first of a long line of curates in St. John's. Evidence that both he and his successor, the Rev. Frank Matthews, were private employees of Mr Denham is to be found in a speech delivered by Mr Denham on a similar occasion two years later, a speech in which he urged the congregation to provide a curate "who should not only be his curate, but theirs". This seems to have been taken to heart, for in the Minutes of a Meeting held on 26th April, 1886 we find recorded the Vestry's decision that "Collections for the Curate Fund be handed to the Incumbent". The first curate named as such in the Minutes of the Vestry is the Rev. W. S. B. Petrie who succeeded the Rev. Frank Matthews in 1886.

The Congregational Soiree was later merged in another of Mr Denham's institutions - the Dedication Festival. This took place annually in mid-November heralded by some such announcement as:

Church of St. John, the Evangelist
Dedication Festival 1888

Saturday November 17th:

Choral Evensong, 7.30 pm with Address (*Preparation*) by Rev. G. Grub, Incumbent of S. James', Stonehaven.

Sunday November 18th:

Holy Communion 7 am.

Holy Communion 8 am.

Morning Prayer and Choral Celebration 11 am, Preacher, Right Rev. the Primus.

Children's Service - 3 pm, Address by Rev. G. Grub.

Address to Men only - 6 pm, by Rev. J. R. Denham.

Evensong and Sermon - 7 pm, Preacher, Rev. G. Grub.

Offertories for Curate Fund

During the week meetings of the four Guilds and other organizations were addressed by a galaxy of visiting speakers, the climax of the Festival being reached on the Thursday when everybody assembled for the Congregational Soiree which by 1891 required the biggest hall in Dumfries - the Drill Hall - to hold it.

Mr Denham had undoubtedly brought the congregation to a new state of life and vigour and by continuous missionary work among the poor had raised it to a

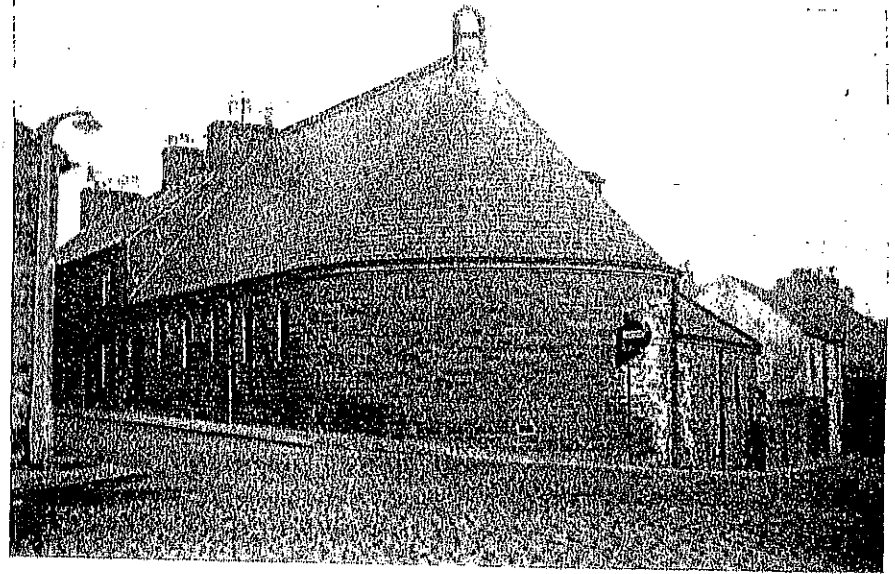
numerical strength hitherto unachieved. His popularity with the working class was immense but, unfortunately, as his influence in that quarter increased so his power over another section of the congregation declined. The seed of contention was sown in a speech which he delivered at the second Congregational Soiree in 1885. "I tell you frankly", he had said on that occasion, "that I wish there were no seat-rents in St. John's; and if it had depended on me when I came, I would have had no seat-rents, because I believe that if the Church on earth is to be the Father's house it ought to be as free as the Father's house in heaven." Subsequently, it was decided by the Vestry that on the conclusion of the first Lord's Prayer at Matins and at Evensong on Sundays all seats be free, that they also be free throughout every week-day service and that future seat-letting be on these conditions, the congregation to be notified accordingly. This, not surprisingly, was as far as the Vestry were prepared to go and after five years Mr Denham, in the face of hardening opposition, decided that the time had come to build, at his own expense, a mission church in which all seats would be as he would have them - "free and unappropriated". 'The congregation', so runs his announcement in the church magazine for September, 1891

'has now increased much beyond the accommodation offered in St. John's, especially in the "free aisle" which is seated for only 100; and it has long been felt that one way - we do not say the best way - of meeting this difficulty is to provide a mission church in which all the seats shall be entirely free and unappropriated. The new church will be very conveniently situated for many busy mothers who find it difficult to come from Maxwelltown to St. John's. Unfortunately full services cannot at first be provided, for the Rector has not succeeded in finding the brother-priest for whom he has so long been seeking. Until further notice, therefore, there will only be an evening service every Sunday at 6 o'clock, and every week-day at 8 o'clock.

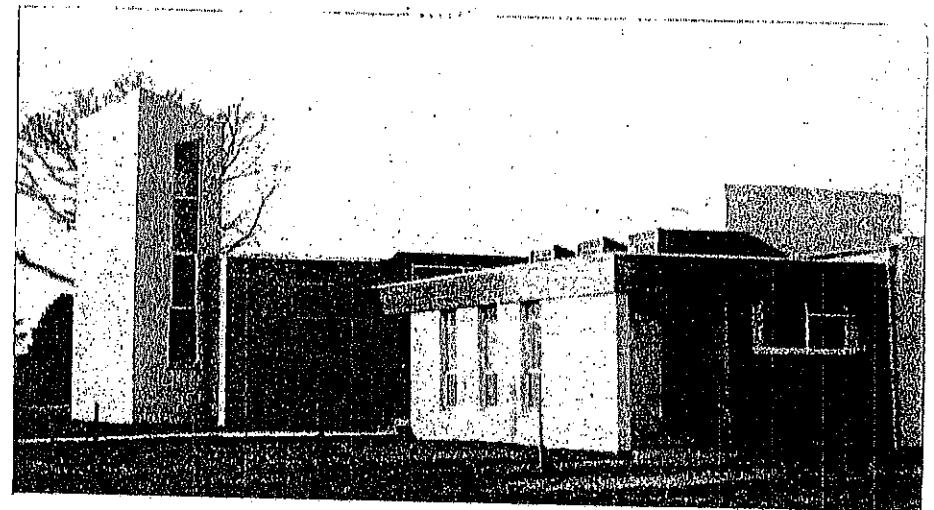
Built of the local sandstone to Mr Denham's own design, the little church occupied a site at the junction of High Street and Howgate in a quarter of Maxwelltown

largely inhabited by mill-hands and foundry-workers. To outward appearance it was a plain oblong with a rounded apse, low walls and a high-pitched roof. Internally the walls were plastered terra-cotta and lined with dark stained and varnished wood to a height of five and a half feet; lighting came from five Norman windows in the south wall and from a number of roof lights. Comfortable open benches with book-boards attached flanked a central aisle, each book-board exhibiting three cards inscribed: "Our Father's House"; "All seats in this church are free"; and "The yearly expenses are met by voluntary offerings. It is hoped, therefore, that every worshipper will contribute ungrudgingly for this purpose. 'If thou hast much, give plenteously; if thou hast little, do thy diligence gladly to give that little.'" The pulpit, litany-desk and rood-screen were all of oak, the latter embellished with scriptural texts and crosses painted on the wood. The altar, also of oak, was the work of a local joiner, Mr W. B. McGeorge, who also gave the litany-desk; the freestone font was the gift of the Rev. A. McEwen; and the communion plate, that of the Four Gilds of St. John's, to mention but three of the many donors whose generosity entirely furnished the little church. Dedicated to St. Ninian, it was opened for worship on St. Ninian's Day, 1891, the consecration of the altar by the Right Rev. Dr Harrison taking place at 6.45 in the morning. Then followed the first Eucharist, the number of communicants making necessary a second celebration at 8 am. Evensong sung by the choir of St. John's, with Mrs Denham at the harmonium, and the Bishop preaching eloquently on the subject of St. Ninian closed a memorable day. Evensong was also held on each of the three following days, the preachers being the Rev. D. P. Ware, Hawick, the Rev. J. Beale, Duns, and a former curate of St. John's - the Rev. W. S. B. Petrie, Glasgow. So ended the first phase of Mr Denham's campaign for the abolition of seat-rents in St. John's.

The second phase opened on the 19th September, 1892 with a meeting of seat-holders to whom Mr Denham put the following proposals:



ST. NINIAN'S CHURCH, HOWGATE STREET, MAXWELLTOWN. 1891-1963



ST. NINIAN'S CHURCH, LOCHSIDE, 1967. Photo A. MacMillan