

# St Peter's Kirk, Thurso, Caithness c 1150–1832

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## ABSTRACT

*The ruined kirk of St Peter, although enlarged and extensively rebuilt in the first half of the 17th century, incorporates considerable remains of what may be an early 12th-century Bishop's Minster or Head Kirk.*

## INTRODUCTION (illus 1–5)

Had it not been for the perverse discontinuity between the timetables of the railway and ferry which enforces a stay of some hours in Thurso on the traveller to Orkney this paper would not have been written. The charms of Thurso are not immediately apparent at a first sight, nor is the burgh extensive, and almost inevitably the visitor will come across the ruins of St Peter's Kirk in the old part of the town. Apart from a notice which states that the church was founded by Gilbert of Moravia in the 13th century, a statement supported by no visible evidence, all is silence. After some searching two local publications come to hand; the first *Visits to Ancient Caithness* from the Caithness Field Club (Watson 1982); the second *Old Thurso* by Donald Grant (1965). The former was the more accurate and cautious, the latter more diverse and romantic, but neither gave more than a cursory account of the ruins. A leaflet sponsored by the Caithness Tourist Board trod a similar path but with additional information drawn from a survey made of the ruins in the early years of this century.

St Peter's had not escaped the attention of MacGibbon and Ross when they wrote the fifth volume of *Castellated and Baronial Architecture of Scotland* (1892). Their account was at third hand, being the notes and sketches of the Rev Alexander Miller, Minister of the Free Kirk at Buckie. These notes are invaluable, for the plans show the detailed internal arrangements of the kirk before it was abandoned in 1832. Miller, who had been born in Thurso in 1843, could not have known the old Kirk at first hand, but he may have had his information from the Rev Walter Taylor, who had been minister of the old Kirk at the time of its demolition. Mr Taylor gave up his charge at the time of the Disruption, and his influence on the Miller family, two of whose sons became distinguished members of the Free Church, was great. Although some of Miller's correspondence with MacGibbon and Ross survives, that concerning Thurso has not so far been traced.

The discovery of a cross with a runic inscription in 1896 close to the Kirk was published in 1897 and this paper together with Alexander Miller's notes formed the basis for the entry on St Peter's in the Royal Commission's *Inventory for Caithness* (RCAMS 1911). After this the church seems to have been forgotten until the publication in 1957 of George Hay's *The Architecture of Scottish Post-*

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*Reformation Churches*, although clearly recognizing its interest and importance, space prevented Hay from considering it in any great detail.

In addition to these written sources there is a survey of the church made by James Grieve, which is held in the Thurso Public Library. This is a most peculiar work; from the notes on the drawings it was carried out between 1900 and 1904, but the drawings are signed *James Grieve FSA Scot*, and Grieve was not elected a fellow until 1922. It is possible that he added his name to a set of drawings completed many years earlier; it is equally possible that like so many surveys and post-excavation reports these drawings were recollected in tranquillity, for certainly they are only partially accurate. Grieve has removed several parts of the building which he found confusing, added a *teampull* or ancient chapel containing a bishop's grave, designed a complete system of roofs together with studded doors and a pulpit, and included a seagull on the roof 'which had its nest in the tower and watched me measuring the church'. Clearly Mr Grieve must be taken with some caution.

Today the church is roofless, but otherwise remarkably complete, the walls standing to their full height in most places (illus 5). The ruins comprise a nave, measuring 51 ft 4 in (15.65 m) by 22 ft 6 in (6.55 m) internally; an enclosed apsidal chancel measuring 16 ft 6½ in (5.03 m) by 14 ft 3½ (4.35 m) diminishing to 13 ft 6½ in (4.13 m) on the chord of the apse: a small square tower with lobes, or half-drum buttresses, containing a staircase, and set at an angle to the south side of the chancel at its junction with the nave; and a square south porch (illus 3 & 4). All these are either largely medieval in construction, or re-built on medieval lines. Additionally there are two large aisles or transepts of 17th-century date. That on the north measures 29 ft 3 in (8.92 m) by 18 ft 6 in (5.64 m), and that on the south 25 ft 6 in (7.77 m) by 18 ft (5.45 m). At some period there was a porch at the north-east



ILLUS 1 Thurso in the early 19th century, from a water colour by J W Alston (Falconer Water). Reproduced by permission of Thurso Burgh



ILLUS 2 Old St Peter's 1829–32 (James Campbell). Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of Thurso Museum.

corners of the north aisle, a small aisle on the west side of the south aisle, and a chamber over the chancel. For all of these evidence survives in the ruins.

As the population of Thurso and the size of the congregation increased more accommodation had to be provided; this was achieved by building lofts over most of the nave, the whole of the north aisle and part of the south aisle, with doorways being formed in windows or slapped through the walls wherever might be convenient. At some period the upper stages of the tower were rebuilt, and the lower stages altered to provide for a prison, and to give more convenient access to the Sessions House, which occupied the chamber or cell over the chancel.

With the abandoning of the church in 1832 it was stripped, the fittings dispersed and the roof removed. The remains rapidly became ruinous, and this in turn led to spasmodic bouts of repair, often with unfortunate results. Although the structure has been secured much of the archaeological evidence has either been destroyed, or lost beneath a bland mask of conservation.

## HISTORY

The foundation of the see of Caithness in c 1145 was a necessary part of the policy of expansion and feudalization which accompanied the extension of the power of the Scottish crown in the first half of the 12th century. When Caithness had been under the temporal control of the Norse earls of

Orkney it had come under such spiritual authority as the bishops in Orkney chose to exercise. There was no need for a separate cathedral for the mainland part of the diocese, although there was probably at least one church on the southern shore of the Pentland Firth, which would have been regarded as a head church or Bishop's Minster, where the episcopal authority would be especially exercised. With the creation of a separate see under the Bishop of Caithness it would be necessary for there to be a church to serve as a cathedral. In the early years of the diocese, as in the neighbouring sees of Ross and Moray there was no settled cathedral, and it was not until the foundation of Dornoch by Bishop Gilbert in 1224 that one was permanently established. Before that date Halkirk has generally if tentatively been held to be the site of the early cathedral. This has been based on the place-name, and the fact that the bishop had a house (it seems not to have been a castle) there, close to the earl's castle of Brawl.

Dr Barbara Crawford, in correspondence, points out that the view of most Norse scholars is that *Halkirk* derives from the Norse *ha-kirkja*, a high church in the sense of one which is of importance. The view is also that this is the only possible interpretation, although there seems to be no use of this term elsewhere to describe a church which was of cathedral status. The first known date of this usage appears to be 1222 (*Orkneyinga Saga*).

The proximity of the bishop's house and the earl's castle at Halkirk and Brawl can of course be paralleled at Thurso where the bishop's castle was at Burnside or Scabster, to the west of Thurso, whilst the earl's castle was at East Thurso. The fact that Burnside was a castle can I think be taken to indicate that this was the more important episcopal residence of the two. What is strange is that there should have been paired power bases within five miles of each other, and whilst it would be convenient if they could be explained as the result of clashing cultures, this is an over-simplification. Clashing cultures there certainly were, but they were not only those of Scottish bishops against Norse earls, but also those of bishops whose obedience was to Hamburg against those whose obedience was to York. This perhaps helps to explain why the site of the first cathedral of the Scottish diocese of Caithness must remain in doubt, although always with the possibility that the *cathedral* itself may have been set up in the bishop's chapel at Halkirk.

Dr Cant, also in correspondence, takes a rather stronger line:

The notion of Halkirk as an alternative to Thurso as an episcopal minster can now, I think be dismissed as a tautologous nonsense to which I myself have contributed. It is very doubtful if it was even a head church originally!

In fact these views are mutually reconcilable. Halkirk may well have become the cathedral of the bishops of Caithness after c 1150, but before that date some other church had served as the Bishop's Minster for the mainland part of the diocese of Orkney. That neither church should become the permanent cathedral of the new diocese was hardly surprising.

It was inevitable that the claims and pretensions of an episcopate, loyal to the Scottish crown, and imbued with the reforming zeal introduced into the church by St Margaret and her sons would soon collide with the view of life held by the Norse earls of Orkney and Caithness. Bishop Andrew, c 1145–85, seems to have avoided causing serious offence, but when his successor Bishop John, 1185–1213, stood against Earl Harald Maddadson on behalf of William the Lion, his eyes and tongue were torn out. This happened close to the castle of Burnside and with the full knowledge of the earl. The bishop was fortunate to survive. The fate of Bishop Adam, 1212–22, was more terrible. Used to the obedience of the monks of Melrose, of which house he had been Abbot, he set about exacting the same obedience from his new diocese, particularly in the matter of the payment of tithes. This not being at all to the taste of his flock he was seized and burned upon his own kitchen fire at Halkirk; Earl John Haraldson was close by at the time, at his own castle of Brawl.

It was hardly surprising that the next bishop should look with particular disfavour on the

northern part of his diocese. Gilbert of Moravia, who was Bishop of Caithness from 1223 until 1245 had previously been Archdeacon of Moray, and was of the family which held the Earldom of Sutherland, an earldom which covered much of the southern and western parts of the new diocese. Shortly after his consecration he founded the cathedral at Dornoch, modelling its constitution on those of Elgin and Lincoln. Although later writers have suggested that Dornoch was chosen for its religious associations this is unlikely to have been the reason. In the south of the diocese and in the shadow of the Earl of Sutherland's castle, it is far more likely that the site was chosen for the protection that could be afforded to the new foundation by the bishop's powerful kinsmen. Geographically Dornoch was about as conveniently placed for a diocesan centre as Thurso – which was hardly at all – and it is likely that, just as the bishops retained their old castle at Burnside, the old church at Thurso retained a function as a *Bishop's Minster*.

It is a tradition, sometimes recorded as fact, that the church was rebuilt in the early 17th century to serve as the cathedral of the restored see of Caithness. This belief may have been coloured by the form of the building, which certainly in its later stages is of a more elaborate nature than might have been expected in a remote parish kirk. During the episcopacy of Bishop Patrick Forbes, 1661–80, the Synod met alternately at Dornoch and Thurso, and this suggests that both tradition and convenience support the view that Thurso has episcopal descent.

## DESCRIPTION

c 1100–1600

Architecturally a church in Thurso dating from before the episcopate of Bishop Andrew would have been small and simple and, since the area was largely under Norse control and influence, would have followed the pattern of similar buildings in the area. Apart from Kirkwall, for which there are special reasons, the most distinguished surviving remains on Orkney – Eligsay, Orphir, and the kirk on the Brough of Birsay – are not large, and date from the end of the 11th and first half of the 12th centuries. If St Peter's dates from the period before the advent of the Scottish bishops it is to these churches that it must be compared, and for the purposes of this argument it is perhaps convenient that nothing remains above ground at Halkirk.

If it is accepted that Egilsay was built after the martyrdom of St Magnus and possibly, if the arguments advanced in *Monumenta Orcadia* are correct, in the years 1135–8, that Ophir dates between 1117 and 1122 and that the church on the Brough of Birsay dates from not later than the first quarter of the 12th century, it becomes apparent that there is an architectural context in which St Peter's can be placed, and which can be set against other Romanesque work elsewhere in Scotland; the date of Birsay is of course still a point of debate.

In the south of Scotland the end of the 11th and the beginning of the 12th centuries, particularly in Berwickshire and the Lothians, saw the founding of a number of parish churches, some with apsidal and vaulted chancels or sanctuaries. The most remarkable and complete are the churches of Leuchars and Dalmeny, with their elaborate decorations and ribbed vaults, but others – Edrom, Ledgerwood, Tynningham, Stobo, Duddingstone, Abercorn and Kirkliston – even in their present fragmentary state are clearly the work of the rich Anglo-Norman school of masonry and design, which was common to much of the British Isles, or at least to those areas where the feudal system was established. In a simplified form the same style is found in the north-east. The fashion had not, apart from the cathedral at Kirkwall, established itself in Orkney or Shetland, nor in Caithness, which until c 1150 and probably much later, fell within the cultural province of the northern islands.

None of the 12th-century churches in Orkney and Shetland shows any elaboration of detail; walling is generally of local slabs; arches are of the simplest form and generally without order or

abacus; plans are usually two-cell; Egilsay alone has a western tower surviving, although one may have been intended at the Brough of Birsay; and the two most sophisticated plans, Orphir and the Brough of Birsay, circular and three-cell respectively, may show influences from overseas.

One curious church, now vanished, was the Kirk of Deerness. This was seen by George Low in 1774, and his description is worth quoting:

The Church of Deerness is very remarkable and part of it looks to be pretty ancient; the east end consists of a vault which crosses the breadth of the inside, and at each side of this is erected a small steeple. Thro' the vault or quire one enters the steeple on his right hand, and by a turnpike stair goes to a small apartment or vestry built between the steeples. From this last apartment he enters the second tower, which, or both probably, have had bells; these are now gone, said to have been carried away by Cromwell's soldiers. Tradition is not clear (and there are not records) who was the builder of this Church. The steeples are said to be monumental and placed over a Lady's two sons buried there, but whether this is so or not is hard to determine. As this is the most remarkable country Kirk in these isles, I have added a sketch as follows . . . (Low 1879).

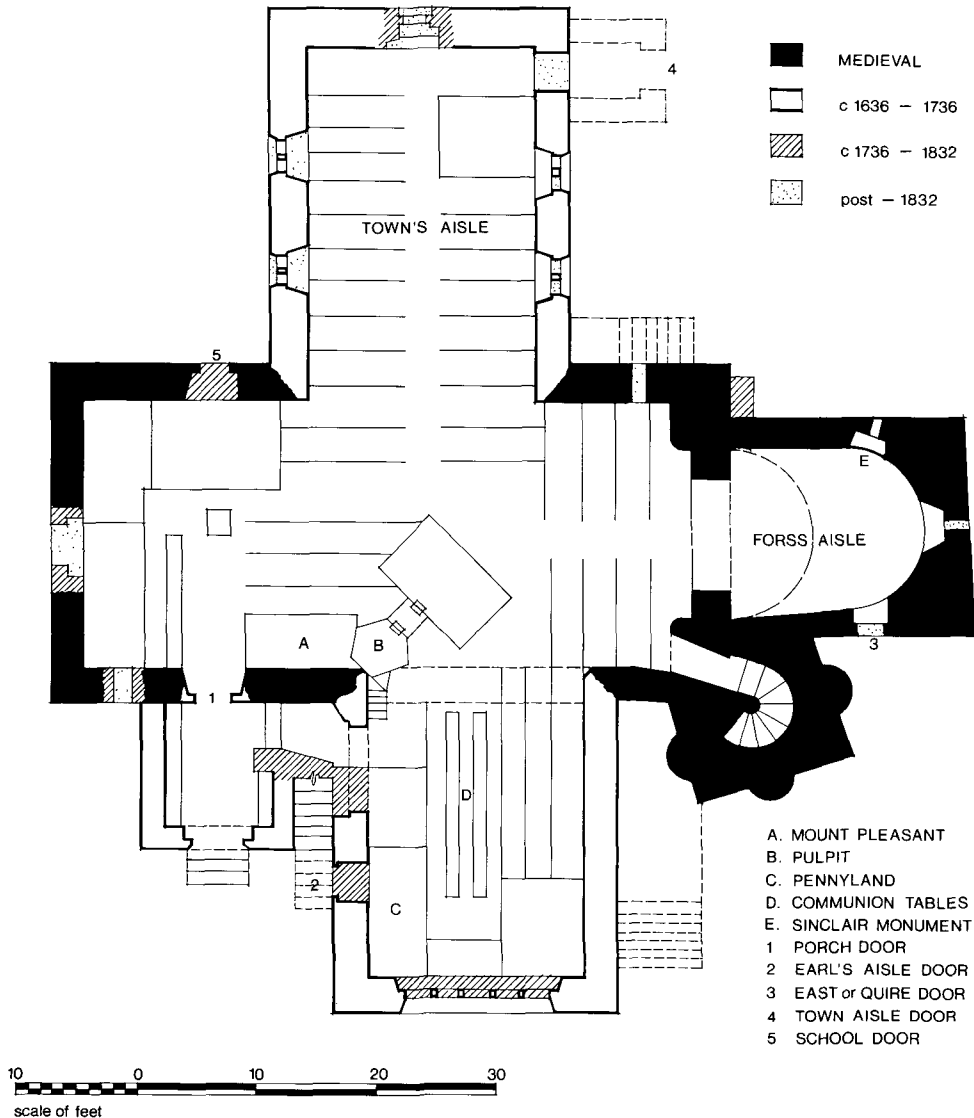
The sketches, for there are three of them, are extremely rough and show the church from the north-west, the south-west and the east. It comprises a rectangular nave, to which a south aisle had been added, and on the north side was a stair to a loft built across the east end of the nave. The vaulted chancel was small and was flanked by two circular towers, that on the south side having windows that clearly lighted a staircase. The chancel was square-ended externally, and both it and the upper chamber were lit by round-headed windows. In the drawing these are shown with voussoirs greatly exaggerated.

As has already been said, early medieval St Peter's consisted of a rectangular nave with north and south doors, a chancel (apsidal internally and square ended externally), a stair tower set at an angle in the junction of the south side of the nave and chancel (illus 3). The tower is not a later addition, but integral with the nave and chancel. Above the chancel are the remains of an upper chamber which opened into the nave. At a later stage a south porch was added. The nave has been largely, and the porch and upper stages of the tower have been completely renewed, but the chancel and lower part of the tower remain substantially as they were built.

The dimensions, which are generous for a church of the first half of the 12th century so far north, follow in the nave the 2.4×1.0 proportion of length to breadth which was almost universal in Romanesque work: the proportion is in fact 2.28×1.0. St Peter's is nearly twice the size of Egilsay, the nave was slightly larger than that of the now vanished church of Tingwall, where the proportion was 2.7×1.0. This church, which was a *head church* and associated with the archdeacon, was the most ambitious church in Shetland (Cant 1976).

Apart from its general size and proportions, those features of St Peter's which it can be argued are peculiarly Romanesque are to be found in the chancel and the lower stages of the tower. They are, however, sufficiently unusual to suggest that although the mason who built St Peter's was working within the Orkney, Shetland and Caithness vernacular tradition, he was not unaware of work being done further afield. Whilst the specifically northern characteristics of the building derive largely from the nature of the material that was to hand – the intractable nature of the stone of the area allows little in the way of moulding or decoration – there are elements which can be paralleled elsewhere.

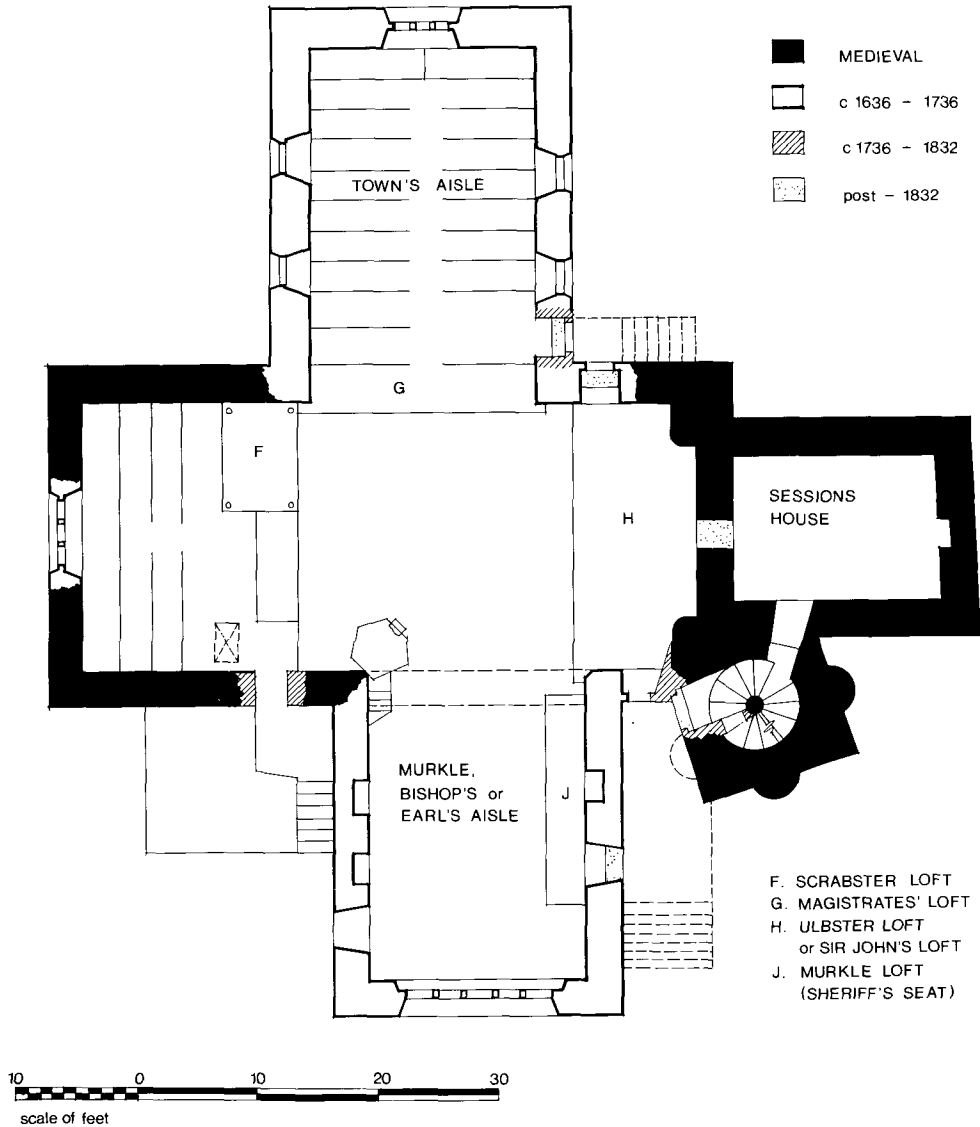
The form of the chancel arch closely resembles those of Egilsay and Orphir, both in the arrangement of the voussoirs, and in the absence of impostes, although it differs from both in that the arch is not the full width of the chancel. Like other vaulted chancels in the area, both apsidal and square ended, that of St Peter's is covered by a barrel vault, in contrast to the ribbed vault more generally found in the south of Scotland. There is no step, as far as can be ascertained, between the nave and the chancel, and the vault is so low that it is very doubtful if the altar could have been raised



ILLUS 3 Old St Peter's 1832. Plan at ground level

on a platform. These are all characteristics observed by Sir Henry Dryden in his notes on the churches of Orkney and Shetland.

So far the chancel conforms to the pattern of other churches in the north attributed to the years 1117 and 1150. There is, however, one feature of the chancel which is a rarity; whilst it is apsidal internally it is square-ended externally (illus 3). That is, it takes the form of an enclosed apse, a form treated in considerable detail by Professor Eric Fernie in *Archaeologia* 1973. Most of the examples which he lists are from the Middle East, pre-Carolingian Europe and the Byzantine lands, but it was a form that lingered on into the Romanesque period and among the examples in England which he cites, Durham Cathedral 1093, and Romsey Abbey 1120, are two churches which had a considerable



ILLUS 4 Old St Peter's 1832. Plan at gallery level

influence in Scotland. In a later paper Professor Fernie draws attention to the apse of the same form at St Margaret's Chapel in the castle at Edinburgh, although he argues that in this case the chapel originally formed part of a larger building. The Royal Commission inventory gives a date of c 1110-20 for St Margaret's Chapel, that is to say roughly contemporary with Romsey. This is not unimportant, for Romsey had strong connections with the House of Canmore. Not only was St Margaret's sister Abbess, but Princess Matilda, the Queen's daughter had been an inmate before her marriage to Henry I of England, and it is clear that masons who had worked at Romsey had also worked at the royal foundation of Jedburgh.

There is also the Durham link to be considered. It is now generally accepted that masons trained



in the Durham tradition came north to work at Dunfermline Abbey, and on the new cathedral, which was building at Kirkwall. In his masterly analysis of the early development of that building Stewart Cruden suggests the north and south choir aisles terminating in enclosed apses, dating to c 1137–42. It need therefore be no cause for surprise that the mason of St Peter's should be aware of this form of apse. The form is sufficiently unusual for an outside influence to be assumed, and the most likely one is that of the new cathedral being built across the Pentland Firth.

The apse, which is without datable features, was lit by three small windows, with deep and splayed embrasures. Only one, the east window, is clearly visible and that is now blocked externally; that on the south side was converted into a doorway after the Reformation, whilst that on the north side is now filled by a wall monument. The vault of the chancel is low in proportion to the height of the nave, and this is accounted for by the need to accommodate the chamber above the chancel. This is similar to the arrangement which still exists at Egilsay, and formerly existed at Deerness. As at Egilsay there was an opening from this chamber into the nave above the chancel arch, the outline of which, although it has since been blocked, is still visible. Unlike Egilsay, where the chamber could only have been entered by means of a ladder from the nave, the chamber at Thurso was entered through a doorway off the staircase in the tower. This was also the arrangement that was adopted at Deerness, and was of course much more convenient.

The purpose of these upper chambers is obscure; they are comparatively rare and generally early in date. Some, such as those at Kirk of Ness in Shetland and Kemply in Gloucestershire, are little more than accessible lofts in the roof space, but Egilsay, although its access is restricted, and Thurso, both of which had large openings into the nave seem to be more than this. Thurso particularly with a separate doorway and staircase is perhaps more reminiscent of Compton in Surrey. These chambers have been variously described as treasures, vestries, muniment rooms, and even living quarters for visiting clergy, this latter being perhaps the least convincing suggestion. At Compton, where the chamber is fully open to the church, its function as an upper chapel or chancel is perfectly clear. The rooms at Thurso and Egilsay may have served a similar purpose, either in connection with the display of relics, or possibly – although this seems unlikely – the reading of the Epistle and Gospel at the great festivals. There is also evidence for such an arrangement in the early church of Mont Saint Michel.

Apart from its dimensions, plan, and some of the masonry of the walls, little of the medieval nave has survived the later rebuildings and alterations. It is significant, however, that towards the western end of the nave there are both north and south doors, and that these doors are opposite each other – a medieval arrangement that was seldom employed in post-Reformation churches. Similarly the south porch with its side benches follows a medieval form seldom found in early Presbyterian churches, and which argues medieval foundations at least.

The tower presents a much more difficult task of interpretation. Roughly square and measuring approximately 13 ft 3 in (4.04 m) on each side, it is set at an angle to the chancel, the angle of its east-west axis being 73 degrees to that of the church. Since there is no architectural or structural reason for the tower not to be on the same axis as the rest of the building the explanation that first comes to mind is that the tower is an older, free-standing structure which has been incorporated into the later church as was done at Dunblane, and to a certain degree at Brechin. On examination of the fabric, however, it becomes quite clear that the junction of the tower with the chancel and the south-west corner of the nave is all of one build, and that both the access to the tower stair from the church and the access to the upper chamber from the stair are part of the original plan. Apart from the similar plan at Deerness, and the possibility that such an arrangement may have existed at the Brough of Birsay, parallels are not easy to find. One that dates from the second half of the 11th century is the church of St Finghin at Clonmacnoise in Co Offaly, where the round tower in the southern angle of the nave and chancel



ILLUS 5 Old St Peter's: general view from south-west (G Watson)

opens directly from the chancel, but it does not appear that there was an upper chamber to the chancel.

Although the nave at Thurso has been much rebuilt the position of the tower makes it clear that it was planned to take account of a nave of similar width to the present one. This is clearly seen by the arrangement of the staircase, which is approached through a short barrel-vaulted passage, entered by way of a round headed doorway, without rebates, in the south-east corner of the nave, where the north-west angle of the tower projects into the nave itself (illus 6). A curious feature, and again presumably an original one, is that the projection with its rounded corner is matched in the north-east corner of the nave. Since the staircase is so arranged that it turns and rises to give entry to the chamber over the chancel it is difficult to believe it was not intended from the outset as part of the original design. Nor in fact is it possible to detect in the masonry of the walls that there is any point where a break between two structures has occurred.

In its present form the lower part of the tower poses a number of problems; the upper and later stages are straight-forward. In the first place, although for convenience it is called a tower, there is little substantial evidence to show that it ever rose any higher than its present extent. About 6 ft (1.8 m) above the entrance to the chancel chamber the circular stair comes to an end and there is a clumsy junction both internally and externally with the next phase of the work.

It could be argued that the structure only served as a stair to the chamber, though this seems unlikely. The staircase, which is about 3 ft 6 in (1.07 m) wide, is unusually large if this was its only purpose, and certainly the tower walls are of a more substantial nature than would be necessary for so slight a structure; in fact a stair access from the nave, as at Egilsay, would have been sufficient. Then

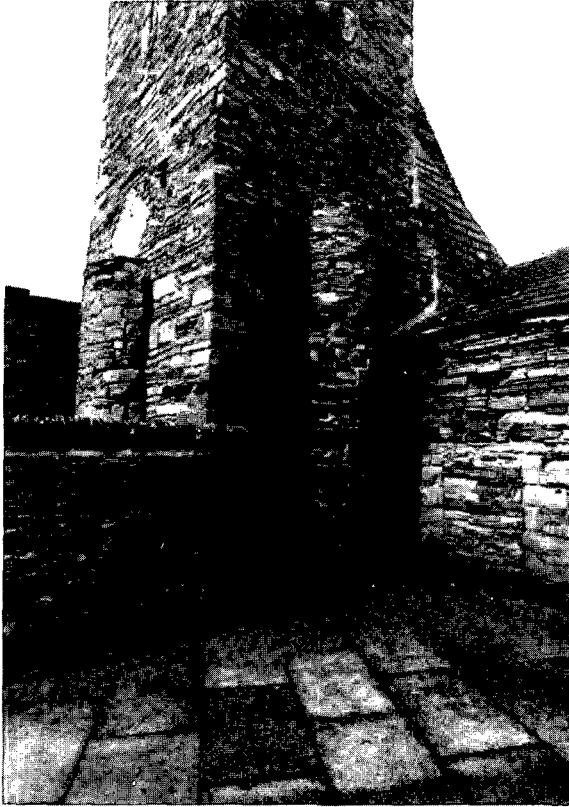


ILLUS 6 Old St Peter's: east wall of nave (G Watson)

too some consideration needs to be given to the angling of the tower relative to the chancel. Since it does not appear to be an earlier building that has been incorporated, and as the stair could have fitted perfectly well into a tower set square to the main building there needs to be a reason to account for this eccentricity. It could of course be due to some feyness on the part of the mason, although this does not seem to be a very likely explanation.

One possibility is that the tower related to something that was in no way connected with the church, and which determined the angle at which it had to be seen. The possibility that immediately springs to mind that would cause a tower to be built at an eccentric angle (a tower which by its nature would be visible at a considerable distance) is the need for a marker for ships entering the Thurso river (illus 1). It may be to this that the rocks of Kirk Ebb owe their name, rather than to the fanciful legend of the *Kirk at the Ebb*.

The details of the lower part of the tower point to a period that is unlikely to be later than c 1130, and could in fact be considerably earlier. The staircase itself is not a newel stair, that is a stair



ILLUS 7 Old St Peter's: tower from south-east (G Watson)

in which each tread consists of a single stone whose wide end is built into the wall and whose narrow end, resting on the identical tread below it forms a pillar or newel which, in theory, can be self-supporting. Instead it is an ascending barrel vault, built round a central core, 2 ft 6 in (0.76 m) in diameter, with the treads formed of several stones built directly above the vault. This form of stair is generally early, and a similar and datable staircase exists in the keep at Rochester Castle which was built c 1120. As this form of construction lasted into much later periods in areas where no large and suitable stones were available, it could be argued that the tower did not necessarily date from early in the 12th century. There is, however, an even earlier feature which helps to date the tower, and this is the curious form of buttressing adopted. Approximately in the centre of each of the three clear faces of the tower is a half drum buttress, finishing originally with a roughly rounded top (illus 7). That on the east face seems complete, that on the south face has been truncated, and that on the west face largely destroyed. The position of these buttresses at the point where, because of the internal stairs, the walls are thinnest is structurally sound, although probably unnecessary because of the very solid construction of the tower. This positioning is also useful in that it shows that the entry to the stair must always have been at its present point. The difficulty that they presented was that at first there seemed to be no similar example of such work. There was certainly a likeness of a sort to the rounds attached to the west faces of the towers of Brixworth and Brigstock churches in Northamptonshire, but this was deceptive, for in both cases these are stair turrets, which seem to be of 10th-century date. However, a

recent visit to the Loire valley, admittedly in a quest for the wines of Vouvray, rather than Romanesque buttresses, showed a small church of Autrèche, about half-way between Chateau Renault and Amboise, with almost identical buttresses, half-drums with rounded tops, along the wall of the nave. They rise to just over half the height of the wall they support and to which they are only lightly bonded – a characteristic they share with the half-drums at Thurso. The church is said to be of 10th-century date. A more elaborate example of half-drum buttresses can be seen on the donjon at Loches, c 1100. This does not mean that St Peter's was built by masons from the Loire valley, or that the oldest parts surviving are of the 10th century, but it does suggest that this very curious tower represents a tradition that is more than local, and that a date of c 1120–30 would not be too late, and might even be conservative.

With the final establishment of the see at Dornoch St Peter's would have lost much of the importance it had previously enjoyed, although because of its proximity to the Bishop's castle at Scrabster it may have continued in a proto-cathedral role. By the terms of the foundation constitution of the cathedral at Dornoch 14 of the parish churches in the diocese were allocated as prebendal churches for the support of the chapter and for some of the expenses of the cathedral. Six others were reserved for the use or support of the bishop; although Thurso is not specifically named, it has always been believed to have been one of the six, and since it always seems to have had a vicar, it is likely that the bishop received the greater tithes.

For the rest of the middle ages the records tell us little and the building even less. Apart from two references in Bagimond's Roll for the years 1274–5 and 1275–6, when in the first years the *Vicarius de Turishau* was assessed at *xxvi s, vii d.*, and in the second the *Vicarius De Thorsan* for *ii marc*, there is an almost complete gap until the 16th century when the vicarage was held by Sir John Matheson, chancellor of the diocese of Caithness. He would have also, under the terms of the cathedral foundation, have held the prebendal church of Rogart. Two other vicars are also known, John Craig who was presented to the living in 1547, and John Innes who was vicar in 1560 and held the vicarage until 1566. He was probably the last Roman Catholic priest at St Peter's, since from 1567 John Rag was described as the *minister*.

#### c 1600–1736

The changed pattern of the worship following the Reformation meant that alterations were inevitable at St Peter's. As the new pattern became established the new services needed increasingly large spaces for congregations obliged to sit through the extreme length and tedium of the Ministry of the Word, although the changes may have been some time coming in Caithness. As far as St Peter's was concerned the alterations more than doubled the size of the church. Two large aisles or transepts were built, that on the south having the addition of a small aisle, or pew, on its western side, and being distinguished by a large traceried window in the south gable. The north aisle had traceried but smaller windows, and a porch at its north-east corner. The scale of these additions and their quality call for explanation, and this may lie to some extent in the history of the diocese. Although the Roman Catholic church had been abolished, and with it much of its organization, there were some anomalies. One of these was that in the remote dioceses of Caithness, Galloway and Orkney the pre-1563 bishops continued to survive and exercise some measure of control. It is doubtful if their spiritual qualities had anything to do with it; Bishop Robert Stewart, Bishop Alexander Gordon and Bishop Adam Bothwell were too pliable and highly connected to be dislodged easily. The other reason may have been due to the destruction of the cathedral at Dornoch by Mackay of Farr and the Master of Caithness in 1570 after which it lay in ruins for many years; it was only returned to partial use in 1638, when Charles I was still urging that repairs to the fabric should be completed, and the nave remained in ruins until the last traces were swept away in the great rebuilding of 1835. There has been a tradition

that St Peter's served some episcopal function after the destruction of Dornoch, and this was given further currency in 1928 when Hew Scott wrote in the new edition of *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae* that:

The ancient fabric was rebuilt in the earlier part of the seventeenth century, and was then made the cathedral of the restored see of Caithness.

No evidence is cited in support of this statement, but it is certainly not at variance with the architectural evidence, nor with the fact that throughout much of the 17th century the Diocesan Synod met alternately at Dornoch and Thurso.

After the death of Bishop Robert Stewart in 1586 there was no formal appointment to the diocese for four years, but in 1590 Robert Pont was confirmed, the first of a line of distinguished men who were to serve Caithness and the church for nearly 100 years. Although presented Pont was never consecrated, acting instead as Visitor or Commissioner, and two of his sons lived on to become ministers at Dunnet and Bowen in the next century. His successor, Bishop George Gledstanes, was only in the diocese for four years before he was transferred in 1604 to the Archdiocese of St Andrews. He was succeeded by Bishop Alexander Forbes. Forbes, who was minister of Fettercairn, which he retained, was connected by marriage to the episcopal dynasty which sprang from William Forbes of Corse, great-great-grandson of James, second Lord Forbes. William Forbes had seven sons, but only two figure in this history. The elder, Patrick, became Bishop of Aberdeen; the second, James, was minister of Alford, and then, consequent upon his banishment for his religious opinions, minister at the Scots church in Delft. James had, amongst his children, a son Patrick, who married the daughter of Bishop Scougal of Aberdeen, and who became, in his turn, Bishop of Caithness after the Restoration. James also had a daughter who is supposed to have married Bishop Alexander Forbes of Caithness, who would have been a distant cousin, descended from Sir John Forbes of the Black Lip. When in 1610 the episcopal succession was re-introduced into Scotland Bishop Alexander was consecrated at Brechin by the Archbishop of St Andrews and the Bishops of Dunkeld and Brechin. Retaining his charge he had little time to spend in his diocese. He was an able preacher and controversialist, and clearly something of a courtier and politician for he was among those who attended James VI to London in 1603. Known on occasions as *The Collie* because of his tendency to follow friends homeward at the dinner hour, he was transferred from Caithness to Aberdeen in 1616 and he died the following year, to be succeeded by his more famous cousin (and possible uncle-by-marriage) Bishop Patrick.

Although there was no Forbes to remain in possession of Caithness, the diocese did not pass out of safe north-east hands; the next occupant was John Abernethy of Mayen. Like his predecessors he was largely an absentee bishop until 1634, retaining his charge at Jedburgh, and being much occupied in Edinburgh with matters of state. He remained bishop until he was deposed by the Assembly in 1638 and died the following year. He seems only to have visited his diocese four or five times in order to collect his rents, an activity which the Earl of Caithness discouraged as much as he could. Bishop Abernethy was represented in Caithness by his son, William, first as minister at Halkirk, and then, from 1662, as minister or vicar at Thurso.

From 1638 to 1661 there was no bishop, and in 1650 William Abernethy was deposed for his support of Montrose, when the Marquis was in the county. Andrew Munro who became minister in 1655 resigned at the incoming of Bishop Patrick Forbes in 1662, but promising obedience to the bishop in the following year remained as minister until 1682, the year after Bishop Patrick's death, when he was deprived for refusing to take the Test. The last bishop, Andrew Wood, was deprived in 1689, and in 1690 Andrew Munro was restored and his intruded successor, John Wood was deprived by Act of Parliament. Munro remained minister until his death in 1696, and it is one of the ironies of history that of the few remaining fittings from old St Peter's his pew or loft front is now preserved at the west end of Thurso's present episcopal church of St Peter and the Holy Rood.

With such a succession of Aberdonian bishops it is hardly surprising that the additions to St Peter's are of a character which shows influences from that area, and it is possible to hazard dates for the building periods. The main structural work must have been completed before 1647, which is the date of the earliest record of the Kirk Session; had the work been undertaken after that date there would have been some note of it. The finishing of the building was probably not completed since in October 1670 it was recorded that the windows were still wanting glass. Only two dates from the years before 1647 can be associated with the church. One is 1636 cut on a reused lintel built into the tower stair, and the other is 1626, carved on one of the seats which once furnished the church. These are slender pegs on which to hang an entire dating system since the first is not in its original position, and the second no longer survives, but taken with the evidence of the building and the known historical facts, they are not unimportant, and date the building both to the episcopate of Bishop John Abernethy 1616–38, and the ministry of his son, William Abernethy 1622–50. Within that period it is likely that the years 1633–4 can be discounted. A famine caused by the failure of the harvest both on land and at sea had produced such terrible suffering that the bishops of Caithness and Orkney had sought help from Government for their starving people. There would have been little coming in by way of rents, and consequently, there would have been little to spare for funding building works.

The first addition to the two-cell medieval plan seems to have been the north aisle, giving the kirk the traditional T-plan of post-Reformation usage (illus 3–4). This appears to have included the rebuilding of the wall-heads and the provision of a new roof. Since the aisle opens into the nave without the opening being arched or gabled over, it must be assumed that the junction of the two high roofs was formed by the use of valleys, and that internally the timbers may have been ceiled in. The south side was a later addition, and the evidence for this lies in the manner of handling its openings into the nave. This is arched over with the crown of the arch well below the level of the wall head. This avoided disturbing the existing roof and wall plate, and in fact any other solution would have been extremely difficult since the aisles are of different widths and are not exactly opposite each other.

If the 1626 date on the bench-end is indicative of a general re-fitting of the interior following major structural alterations a likely date for these is 1622–5 in the early years of William Abernethy's ministry. The date of 1636 could similarly mark the end of the second phase, which, if its completion had been delayed by the famine years, could have started c 1634. In spite of the crudity of some of the detailing the gothic of St Peter's is not a case of Episcopal *Revival Gothic*; rather it is an example, as are parts of the neighbouring kirk at Canisbay, of the fused Gothic-Renaissance style of church building which was prevalent in the south, the style which produced the Edinburgh Greyfriars, Dairsie and the steeples of Cupar, Anstruther Easter, Cawdor and Pittenweem to name but some of the buildings of the first period of Episcopacy.

In the alterations to the nave a large window was formed in the west gable. This was one of three lights with interlaced tracery and transom, and a matching window was also formed in the north gable of the north aisle. This form of tracery (described so much more picturesquely as 'switch-line' in Ireland) was a late medieval form which became popular in Scotland and continued in use until the end of the 17th century. There do not seem to have been any other large windows in the nave, but this lack was compensated for in the north aisle, where in addition to the window in the gable, there were four windows in each of the aisle walls arranged on two levels. The lower windows are of two lights with rough tracery, and the jambs are moulded externally and internally, a feature they share with the two gable windows. The upper windows are square with plain internal jambs and moulded external architraves and it is possible that they date from the 1630–6 phase, or from the introduction of a gallery into the north on the Town's Aisle. They are not placed directly over the lower windows, and are squeezed very uncomfortably under the wall head. In any case the introduction of the gallery into the aisle cannot have been the first intention since its level (which can be adduced from the corbels in

the nave which supported its front and the threshold of the entrance door) cuts across the heads of the lower windows, and the doorway itself which cuts into the head of one of them.

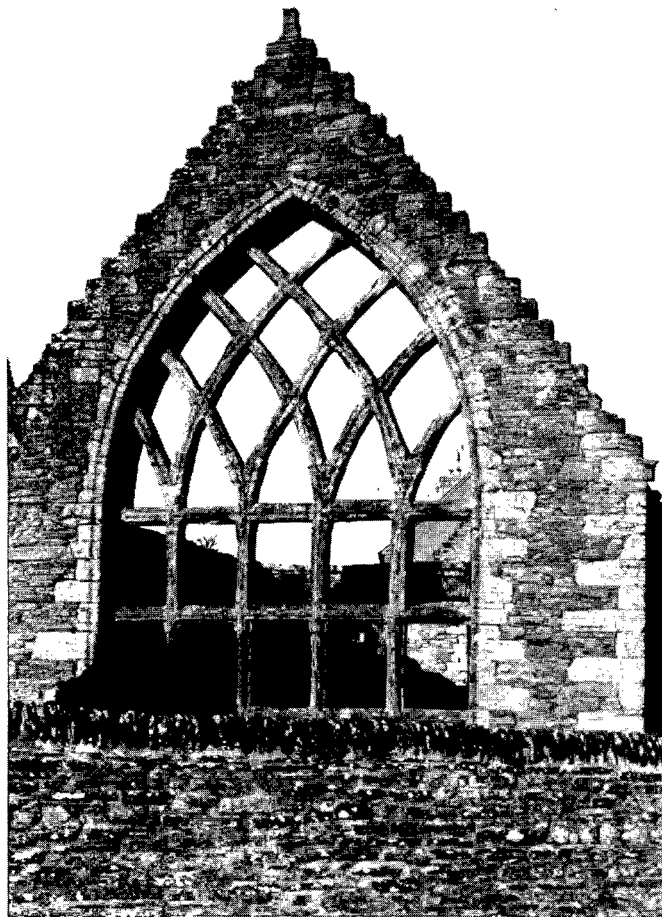
When it was built the Town Aisle was entered by a door and porch at its north-east corner. The porch has gone and the doorway is now blocked, but the ghosting of the roof-line of the porch can still be determined and above the lintel of the blocked doorway is a stone relieving arch. This feature occurs at only one other point in the kirk, over the blocked doorway into the Ulbster Loft. This loft lay across the east end of the nave, and was entered through a doorway at its northern end. The forestair which led up to this doorway was also made to serve the later doorway to the Town's Aisle Loft. The Ulbster Loft was lit by a window at its southern end, cut in the south wall of the nave, and this window was also transomed.

At this period it seems that the nave could have been entered through both the north and the south doors, both of which had segmental rear-arches. Because of the rise in the level of the kirkyard, and the subsequent blocking it is impossible to determine any details of the north door, which may still be largely medieval.

The south door is clearly a 17th-century rebuild with well-moulded but badly weathered jambs and lintel, and what is possibly the remains of a date stone above it. The porch which protects the door and is about 12 ft square (1.11 m<sup>2</sup>) has lost its gable, and has been considerably altered. Originally it had a steeply pitched roof, stone benches on either side, and an outer doorway, with a chamfered surround, checked to take a timber door. The original pitch of the gable can be determined from the fragment of the moulded eastern skew part which survives; an old drawing which depicts St Peter's shortly before its closure shows that the porch door was gothic in form, if not medieval in date. The bench on the east side was partly destroyed when a doorway was formed to the space between the porch and the south aisle. The lintel to this doorway is broader than the opening and has been reused from somewhere else, possibly another building since there is nowhere in the kirk which seems suitable.

Shortly after these works were finished a start must have been made on the south aisle. This was clearly designed to be the most striking part of the building and its purpose must have been to dignify its function. The aisle is entered from the nave through a wide segmental arch, with very slight chamfers on the arris. As has been noticed the crown of the arch was set sufficiently low to avoid disturbing the recently renewed wall-plates of the nave roof. The aisle is dominated by the huge five-light window in the south gable. The head of this window is filled with interlaced tracery and the window is further divided by three transoms (illus 8). This is a curious arrangement; one transom would have been acceptable, as had been used in the north and west windows at St Peter's, in the medieval west window at Kirkwall and the east window at the Aberdeen Greyfriars, which was probably the model for the Thurso window. More than one transom is unusual in a church window. In secular work any transoms at this period are rare. They certainly occur at Linlithgow in the New Work, which dates from 1618–20 and where, on the north front, English influence is obvious. Nearer to Thurso they are found in the Earl's Palace at Kirkwall, and although this is closer to Thurso in style, the date of not later than 1610 makes it an unlikely source of influence. The window is moulded in all its members internally and externally and the aim is an appearance of great richness. Unfortunately, the conception runs ahead of the execution, for the mouldings are crude and the junctions of the mullions, particularly in the tracery of the head, are clumsy. This suggests that the masons who erected the window may have been working from a draft or plot, which they only imperfectly understood. Flanking the great window there are two single-light windows in the east and west walls (illus 10). These have moulded flat heads and architraves externally and plain dressed-stone rounded heads internally. The window in the east wall, now blocked, was later converted into a door. These windows are at high level and, together with three recesses, show that when it was built the south aisle





ILLUS 8 Old St Peter's: south window (G Watson)

was not intended to contain galleries. These recesses, two in the west wall and one considerably larger in the east wall, have bolection frames, and were clearly designed to house memorial tablets, which have either been destroyed, or were never put in place.

In addition to these features, there is a blocked doorway and a partly blocked archway in the west wall. The doorway was probably blocked sometime after 1736; it is partly covered externally by a 19th-century wall tablet, and no details survive of any moulded stonework. The partly blocked arch is something of a puzzle. It is round-headed and richly moulded and formed the entrance or frame to an apartment between the aisle and the porch. On the external face of the west wall is the drip mould which protected the lean-to roof of this structure. It is part of the original build of the aisle. It was destroyed when the forestair to the nave loft was built, at which time the doorway was forced in the east wall of the porch, but there is no reason why the chamber and the porch should not have existed coevally.

Clearly the purpose for which the South Aisle was built must account for its design, and early travellers who, confused by the huge south window, called it 'choir' or 'chancel', may not have been





ILLUS 9 Old St Peter's: porch and south wall of the nave (G Watson)

very far from the mark. At various times it has been known as the Earl's, the Bishop's or the Murkle Aisle, and each of these names throws some light on its history.

The first mention of it as the Earl's Aisle comes in 1702 when the Kirk Session records 'the making up the Earl of Caithness his window in the church'. This presumably refers to the blocking of



ILLUS 10 Old St Peter's: west wall of south aisle from the nave (G Watson)



the lowest row of lights in the south window. This would have become necessary once pews were placed in front of it since the very low sill would have exposed the occupants of the pews to draughts and chills. The aisle had been the burial aisle of the Sinclairs of Murkle, which family inherited the Earldom in 1698. Before that date the title of Earl's Aisle would not have been applicable. On the other hand the designation 'Bishop's Aisle' was surviving as late as 1730 when it was recorded that the windows and roof of the Bishop's Aisle were in need of repair, and Alexander Fraser, who enjoyed the anachronistic distinction of being Chamberlain to the Bishopric, had to provide for this expense. Since there had been no bishop for 46 years the name must be a tradition well-remembered.

To call the south aisle the Bishop's Aisle could be taken to imply no more that it contained the seat of the bishop when he attended services at St Peter's, and whilst this may be true to a certain extent, for his pew may well have been in the arched chamber on the south side, it is unlikely to be the whole truth. It is more probable that the name derives from the fact that the aisle was built at the instigation of a bishop (almost certainly Bishop John Abernethy) and that it was built for the performance of a service particularly associated with the Bishop, or rather with bishops in general.

When in 1610 James VI re-established the episcopacy he continued in his efforts to bring seamliness and order into the services of the church; his efforts culminating in the Perth Assembly of 1617, and in the Five Articles which emanated from it. The first and, amongst the more extreme protestants, most bitterly resented dealt with the vexed form of receiving Communion kneeling. The article states the position quite clearly:

. . . The Assembly thinketh good, that the blessed Sacrament be celebrated hereafter meekly and reverently upon their knees!

Now for this to be done requires one of two things: either an altar with communion rails, or long tables or benches around which it was possible for large numbers of people to kneel. The first, whilst clearly the solution which took up least room and involved little alteration to existing buildings, was anathema to the extremists, and hardly acceptable to the moderates, and it was the second solution that seems to have been generally adopted. Unfortunately in the course of time the original arrangements have given way to a sluttish, conventicle-like bareness, or an entirely inappropriate approximation to an Anglican setting as approved by the Oxford movement. Even where communion pews survive they are generally of the 18th- or early 19th-century convertible type such as were added at St Peter's.

Fortunately in Miller's plan of Thurso two long communion pews are shown occupying the centre of the south aisle, and Miller also notes that they were covered by a tester, or canopies, supported on posts. Later pews had encroached on the floor of the aisle, but the communion pews seem to have retained their canopies until the end, thus preserving the aisle from being filled with galleries or lofts. Before the Murkle loft, the Pennyland pew, and the other seats ranged against the walls were added the south aisle probably preserved the correct setting for the pre-Laudian Scottish liturgy. The splendour of the architectural frame made a dignified setting, and seems to have been a unique survival.

In the first 100 years of its life the kirk appears to have served the needs of the parish with there being little expenditure other than on routine maintenance on minor works. In 1682 locks were bought for the doors for their better keeping and the instruction was given that the porch door at least should be kept open between the hours of seven and 10 in the morning; and in 1704 the steeple was in need of repairs, which needed more timber than the burgh could provide at that time. By 1707 the great door was in need of a new key; in a change of religious fashion it was found inconvenient that the church should be open except when a service was being held – a fashion which prevails to this day though whether to protect the kirks from Christians or vandals is never made clear. In the following year £168 Scots were paid in order to lessen the straightness of the pulpit, a straightness which

incommoded the minister, a portly cleric. The roof, no doubt because of its exposed condition, gave constant trouble, and in 1709, 1729 and 1730 there were considerable repairs carried out.

The town suffered from the lack of adequate public buildings and in Macfarlane's *Genealogical Collections* it is recorded that:

Above a vault looking into the East end of the Church is a Session House, but by the permission of the Kirk Session it is used by the Sheriff and Magistrates of Thurso for a Court House and prison; and above a dungeon likewise allowed them is a steeple and common clock.

The Session House was of course the chamber over the chancel, which was reached from the tower stair and to which a fireplace had been added. This change of use led to alterations in the building which can still be seen. A new doorway was formed in the west wall of the tower to give access to the Session House, and this led to the destruction of the upper part of the half-round buttress on this face. The remains of the buttress can be traced in the masonry of the fore-stair by which this door was approached. At the same time the stair was partly blocked at the level of this doorway by a wall incorporating a small hatch and the reused 1636 lintel. The wretched prisoners were forced through this trap into the dungeon formed in the lower part of stair and stair lobby. With the door from the nave built up and without light or heat, and with very little air it was an appalling place.

This passage contains reference to the common clock, and from an entry in the Kirk Session's record for 1719 when James Wayter was paid for 'ringing the church bell every night at 8 o'clock and noticing the clock' it seems clear that there was a clock with an *observable* face on the tower. It would have had to have been on either the east or south faces, since on the others it would have been obscured by the roofs. At first sight it would appear that the freestone lozenge on the south face was the backing for the dial, but on examination this is difficult to accept. In the first place the earliest surviving drawings of the kirk do not show a clock at all, and in the second place there is no way that a clock in such a position could be driven, since there is no aperture for the drive to the hands. It seems more likely that this stone formed part of a sundial, and that the clock was higher on the tower. Although Wayter was paid to ring one bell there were in fact three, one large and two small, which were re-cast into one in 1740.

#### 1736-1832

By 1736 the kirk had served for over a hundred years and had served a parish which had probably doubled in population in that time. A building that had been greatly enlarged in 1636 must have been woefully inadequate for the increasing numbers attending services, and this would have been made worse by the tendency of the heritors to take up much of the space for their own pews, and those of their principal tenants, a tendency that was to be noticed and deplored by Sir John Sinclair in the first *Statistical Account*. An indication of this pressure on space is given in the Kirk Session record on 4 October 1736. The following Sunday was Sacrament Sunday, and 'to prevent any disturbance in the Church the Session appoints the afternamed men to keep the several doors of the Church . . . '.

The names of the men are of little importance, but those of the doors – five are named – are of great interest. They are the Porch Door, the Town Aisle Door, The Quire or East Door, the School Door, and the Earl's Aisle Door. These are the doors by which the congregation entered the body of the kirk, and with one exception are easy to identify. The Porch Door into the nave by way of the South Porch is the only one still open; the Town Aisle door at the north-east corner of the north aisle has lost its porch, the Quire Door occupies the space of the window in the south wall of the chancel and the Earl's Aisle door is in the west wall of the south aisle; the exception is the School door, but as the only remaining door at ground level is the north door this was in all probability it. Two other doors existed at this period, the one in the tower which led to the Sessions House, and that on the north side of the nave opening into the Sinclair of Ulbster loft. Neither of these would have needed to be

guarded against the inrush of the pious mob. It is safe to assume that the absence of further doorways is evidence of the absence of any other lofts or galleries.

By 1755 the population of the parish had risen to 2963: in 1710 there had been 2000 catechisable persons and clearly further accommodation had to be found for the increasing numbers; indeed it may have already been found. The whole of the Town's Aisle was lofted over, thus doubling the space available for the townspeople. The loft was entered by way of a door on the east side, at the angle between the aisle and the nave, which shared the forestair serving the Ulbster loft. The front of the Town's loft was reserved for the Magistrates and was carried on stone corbels projecting on either side of the opening between the aisle and the nave. Because of the loss of light a small window was slapped through the north gable wall.

A similar loft was formed over the nave, coming as far east as the opening to the Town's Aisle, and much the largest pew here was the Scrabster Loft which appears to have had a canopy or tester supported on pillars. Entry to this loft was by way of a doorway forced through the south wall above the porch. The forestair to this door destroyed the chamber on the west of the south aisle and scrambled clumsily over the porch itself. It would certainly have blocked the Earl's door if the level of the kirkyard had been any lower. The loft enjoyed the benefit of light from the west window, and from a rooflight above the door, but the floor of the nave was largely in darkness, for the two small windows formed in the west and south walls could have been of little help.

Because of the use of the south aisle as the Communion aisle it was only possible to build a narrow gallery, one seat in depth and known as the Murkle Loft, along the east wall. To reach this the east window was converted into a door, its iron bars being removed and its sill lowered. It is not clear how this door was reached. Miller's plan shows that the forestair to the Session House was extended, but there is no evidence in the structure to support this and the addition may well have been in timber. No new gallery could be built at the east end of the nave since this space was filled by the existing Ulbster loft. There may have been one other gallery in the nave; in 1726 the kirk officers complained that 'some boys on Sundays sit in such places as to endanger themselves by falling from great heights and this disturbs the hearers'; this suggests a loft at a very high level indeed. The most likely place for this would have been against the east gable above the Ulbster loft, with an entrance from the Sessions House. A loft in just such an elevated position is recorded at old St Giles, Elgin, where it was occupied by the carpenters.

There were further seats in the Forss aisle, as the old chancel was called, but since all but one of the three windows had been blocked, these seats, like those in the nave, must have been particularly gloomy.

At some time in the 18th century the upper part of the tower had been rebuilt. Repairs were required by 1704 but there is no record that these were carried out at the time, although it is likely that they had been completed by 1726 when the court was using the loft above the chancel and there was a dungeon in the base of the tower. The rebuilding, which was complete above the level of the main wall head of the kirk, and which is clearly observable in the change of masonry, introduced wooden floors to which access was by ladder. The roof was covered by a pyramidal stone slated roof and, if the old picture of the kirk is correct, the tower was another two floors higher than it is at present.

By the end of the 18th century the population had risen to 3169, and the church was becoming increasingly crowded. In the *Statistical Account* (vol 18) Sir John Sinclair describes it as:

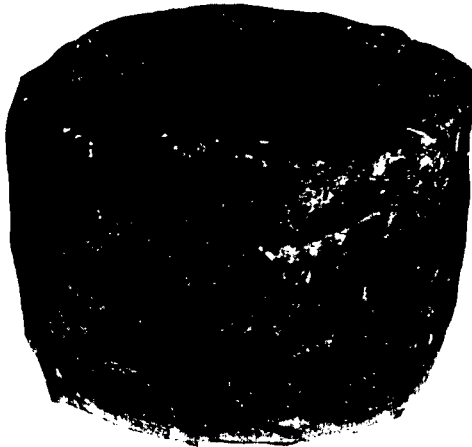
. . . the only public building in the town. It is built in the Gothic style in the form of a cross, and though not large is a substantial and commodious building. In the south aisle is the burying place of the Sinclairs of Murkle. The north aisle belongs to the town exclusively. The rest is possessed by country inheritors and their tenants, but very unequally indeed, and a division of the church is very much needed.

Even the Magistrates were being crowded out of their loft, and in 1806 the Session ordered more pews to be provided, these pews being made so that they could also be used by communicants on Sacrament Sundays. These presumably would have been in the south aisle. But since they were rented, they could not have been much help to the poor parishioners.

At the same time that the church was suffering from crowded conditions internally, the condition of the kirkyard was becoming a scandal – the increasing number of burials had raised the level considerably above that of the church floor – and to the indignation of many it was being used as a rubbish dump. Although money continued to be spent on maintenance it was with less and less enthusiasm. By the 1820s it was clear that major work was necessary, and in 1828 the Presbytery called for a survey of the fabric. The survey was alarming. The roof and timbers were all decayed, the walls leaning, hollow and rotten, and the church was unsafe (appendix A). This view was supported by James Bell, the General Inspector of Works. In face of this there was little to be done but to start as soon as possible on another church to be built in the new extension of the burgh to the west of the old town. A design was commissioned from William Burn, the work was pushed ahead and on the last Sunday of 1832 Dr Walter Ross Taylor preached his final sermon in the old kirk. The building which had seen 700 years and more of Christian worship was closed, and its contents scattered.

#### FITTINGS AND DECORATIONS

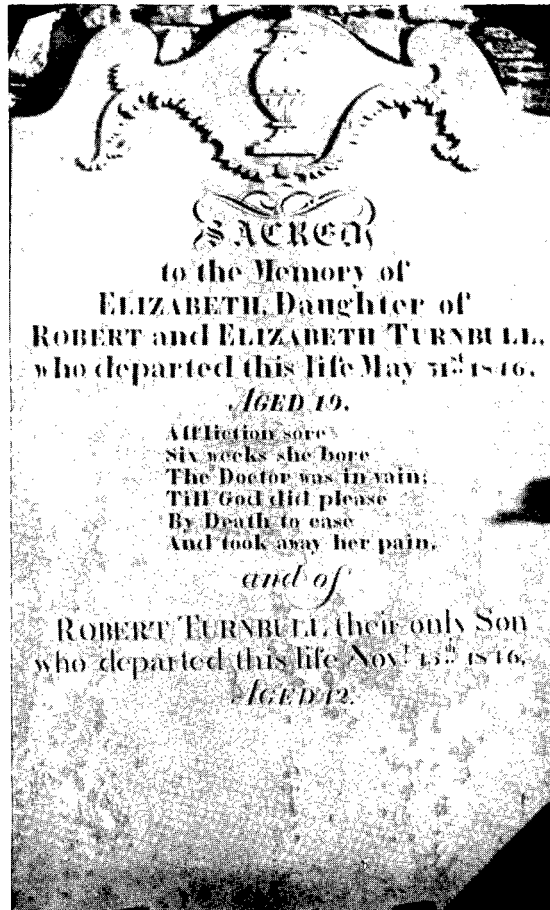
When St Peter's was abandoned in 1832 little heed was taken to the fittings, almost everything was dispersed and only fragments have survived. The bowl of the medieval font rests in the Thurso Museum (illus 11); the front of the Rev Andrew Munro's loft dated 1676, with his crest and his, and his wife's, initials can be seen against the west wall of Thurso Episcopal Church. The iron fastenings for hanging the pulpit tester are still fixed in the south wall of the nave, and there is also a large key in the Thurso Museum that is said to have come from St Peter's. Nothing else has been identified. From the records it seems that the church was well furnished, and no doubt much of the early woodwork was richly carved; it is said that some of the pew ends bore the date 1626 which was a period when church furnishings were particularly elaborate. The pulpit altered, or made anew, was a three-decker, hexagonal in plan with a sounding board or tester,



ILLUS 11 Old St Peter's medieval font (G Watson, reproduced by permission of the Trustees of Thurso Museum.

and the pew and loft fronts would all have been carved. Like the communion pews the Scrabster pew in the west gallery had a canopy carried on four posts. This work would probably all have been of oak for the horrid tones of pitch pine were unknown, and if deals rather than oak had been used these would have been painted. Before the introduction of the galleries the church would have presented a particularly brilliant picture with a flood of light pouring through the huge south window on to the richly carved woodwork, and the painted walls and monuments. Calder recalls that behind the pews the walls were covered with panelling on which were painted biblical scenes, including Isaac being sacrificed by a Kilted Abraham, and in the chancel there are still traces of painting on the plaster. Also in the chancel is a wall monument with traces of colour on it; vigorously and crudely carved, it is to a member of the family of Sinclair who married a Sutherland of Forss, and may date from the early 17th century. Lost too are the velvet mortcloth given at his death in 1680 by Bishop Forbes, the Communion cup, Baptism basin and sandglass bought in 1708, and the bell, embossed 'The Church Bell of Thurso 1740' and made from the metal of three older bells which may have been medieval.

Memorials have had more luck than other fittings, and a number survive from the years before the church was abandoned. One, the Sinclair–Sutherland monument in the chancel, has already been noticed. According to information given to Calder by James Sinclair of Forss the lands of Forss came by gift to David Sinclair from John, Earl of Sutherland, who was his 'cousin by consanguinity' in 1560. This is difficult to prove, and no two authorities seem to agree on what happened or what was the precise degree of



ILLUS 12 Old St Peter's Turnbull Monument (G Watson)

relationship. In the 18th century there was a marriage between a Sinclair of Forss and a Sutherland of the original Forss family but the monument is too early in style for this date. It may be that David Sinclair married a cousin of the earl, which would account for the joint arms, and that the records are lost and the tradition garbled. Certainly the monument would fit a date c 1580–1610 and is probably in memory of the second Sinclair of Forss. It takes the form of a panel, bearing an inscription and arms, and flanked by crudely carved engaged columns supporting an entablature. Beneath it, as a base, is a rectangular panel carved with a horizontal skeleton and six flanking female figures. Above the entablature is a segmental panel with the monogram EWS. This panel is surrounded by a band of thistles and roses and surmounted by



ILLUS 13 Old St Peter's Runic cross slab (G Watson), reproduced by permission of the Trustees of Thurso Museum.



a winged head. The use of the rose and thistle must put the date after 1603 and the initial W suggests that the monument commemorates William Sinclair of Forss, second son of David, who died in 1606/1607. The whole bears traces of colouring.

Another interesting memorial is the slab to John Manson, who had been chamberlain to Bishop Robert Stewart, and who died c 1600. An earlier stone is the one that commemorates Adam Davidson, who died in 1587, and his wife Katherine Sinclair, who lived until 1592.

On the exterior of the church are two monuments which are worthy of mention. The first, a slate panel in memory of the children of Robert and Elizabeth Turnbull, is an excellent example of the art of calligraphy almost entirely lost today (illus 12). Probably the single most beautiful thing in Thurso, its fragility and exposure to vandalism from which the kirkyard suffers must be cause for concern. The second of these monuments is not beautiful. Lacking in grace and lying on the ground against the south aisle wall it records the deaths of Isabell Campbell in 1827 and her sister Eliza in 1829; the inscription suggests that the latter date was the date of its erection (appendix C). Its importance lies in the fact that in the drawing of Old St Peter's it is shown erected on the sill of the south window, and thus dates the drawing to a period later than February 1829, showing it to be a record of the kirk probably just before it was abandoned.

#### THE MOULDINGS

In many cases an examination of mouldings can be crucial to the dating of a building. Thurso is particularly rich in mouldings which have been applied to many of the features of the 17th-century parts of the Kirk. Unfortunately the various parts are so close in date and the mouldings cover so wide a time span, c 1560-1700, that they are not of great help as dating evidence.

What is apparent, however, is that there seem to have been two masons, working in different traditions, at work on the building at the same time. One appears to have been responsible for the seven windows (those in the gables and the north aisle) where gothic forms were observed. In all these windows the tracery is set mid-wall and both the external and internal arrisses are moulded, the moulding itself being a fairly free roll and hollow without quirks. The mullions and transoms have rolls set in hollow chamfers. On the south door, the east and west windows and the memorial panel recesses of the south aisle, the mouldings are more disciplined and less freely handled, and bear a much greater resemblance to secular work throughout the north-east of the first half of the 17th century. The moulding of the stone of the arch to the chamber on the west side of the south aisle is closer in feeling to the work of the 'gothic' mason, but executed with the greater assurance of the second mason.

Later openings such as the upper door into the tower and the door to the nave loft are given plain chamfers.

If the main rebuilding of the kirk was carried out between 1620 and 1636 a difference in mouldings



ILLUS 14 Old St Peter's Possible runic stone built into north-western angle of the tower (G Watson)

other than small ones rising from the use of several masons would not be expected. What is unusual is that two such different styles should be used simultaneously, and in such clearly defined areas of work.

#### RUNIC STONES

That the site of St Peter's Kirk may have an older Christian history than even the oldest part of the present building was suggested when excavations were carried out close to the east end in 1896. In the course of the work two cists were found at a depth of 5 ft below the general ground level. On top of one of these was a part of a cross slab with a length of 2 ft 9 in (0.84 m). Cut along one side in irregular letters is an inscription:

. . . GE THI UBIRLAK THITA:AFT:IKULB:FOTHUR SIN . . .  
 . . . MADE OVERLAY THIS AFTER INGULF FATHER HIS . . .

The inscription is incomplete but appears to be the work of a dutiful (or repentant son). This stone has been dated between the end of the 10th century when the earldom was converted by the example, or on the orders of King Olaf Tryggvason, and the extinction of the Norse line of the earls with the murder of Earl John in 1231. This slab may not be the only stone of this nature on the site. It has been suggested that a reused stone set high on the west side of the tower (illus 14) may also bear a runic inscription.

#### APPENDIX A

##### 1618. THE PERTH ASSEMBLY: THE FIVE ARTICLES

##### Article for kneeling

- 1 Seeing we are commanded by God himself, that when we come to worship him, we fall down and kneel before the Lord our maker, and considering withal that there is no part of divine worship more heavenly and spiritual, than is the holy receiving of the blessed body and blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, like as the most humble and reverent gesture of our body in our meditation and the lifting up of our hearts best becometh so divine and sacred an action; therefore notwithstanding that our Church hath used since the reformation of Religion to celebrate the holy communion to the people sitting, by reason of the great abuse of kneeling used in the Idolatrous worship of the Sacraments by the Papists; yet seeing all memory of by past superstitions is past, in reverence to God and in due regard of so divine a Mystery, and in remembrance of so mystical an union as we are made partakers of, the Assembly thinketh good that the blessed Sacrament be celebrated hereafter meekly and reverently upon their knees.

(John Spottiswood, Archbishop of St Andrews, *The History of the Church of Scotland* (1965), 538).

#### APPENDIX B

##### THE REPORT ON THE CONDITION OF ST PETER'S KIRK 22 OCTOBER 1828

##### Roof and woodwork – by Pat, Angus and James Sinclair, carpenters

- (1) The whole roof is in a state of great decay in consequence of dry and wet rot.
- (2) Several of the beams of the galleries are rotten in the walls.
- (3) A great part of the windows are insufficient.
- (4) A great part of the door posts and doors are decayed.
- (5) The roof of the vestry is not sufficient.

##### Mason work – by Hugh Tulloch and Daniel Taylor, Masons

- (1) The walls at the top are set out over the foundations from 3 to 4 in in different parts in consequence of the perpend or falling of the roof.
- (2) The said walls have the appearance of being built with lime in some places and in others with clay, and are from 3 ft to 3 ft 2 in in thickness, but the said lime from length of time is reduced into mere sand or rubbish and has no hold or band whatever with the stones.
- (3) Where the said walls are set off by the roof, breaches have been made where it is found that they are open in the centre and that by striking of a hammer stones of large size can be drove in by a stroke.

- (4) The materials composing the walls are completely rotten in many places and the lime or mortar used in them has lost its power, leaving the said walls in such places no better than dry stone dykes.
- (5) The arch on the inside of the church which supports a part of the roof is set off about 6 in from the abutment merely from the weight or perpend of the roof.
- (6) The slates on the roof are completely useless from length of time and natural decay, the pins on which they are fixed are so much gone that the slates may be pulled off with ease in any part of the said roof.
- (7) After due examination as above, we hereby declare according to the best of our skill and judgment, that the mason work is wholly insufficient and by no means can be trusted to and that the slates have no manner of fixing farther than the one hanging upon the other. And finally we do not consider that the Church is safe or fit to be occupied in its present state.

## APPENDIX C

## INSCRIPTIONS

- 1 William Sinclair c 1607

EWS  
RECTE · FACIENO  
NEMINI · VEREOR

COMPLETUS · IUDEX · ANIMO ·  
... IQUE · SECUNDUS ·  
... IERAT · PATRIAE ·  
... CARERE · SCIO  
... IT · IN · CINERES  
... SPIRITUS · OCELLI ·  
FLAMINIBUS · PLENI ·  
SCRIBEREMUS · STUDENS ·

- 2 Adam Davidson 1587. Vivat post funera virtus Heir lyes ane famous man Adam Davidson Burgess of Inverness Indwellar in Thurso who departed in June 1587 who being 66 yeires of age And heir lyes Katherine Sinclair his spouse who departed in May 1592 be 70 yeires of age.
- 3 John Manson c 1600. Heir l[e]is ane honest and famous man Jon [Manson] Hallow toftis quha depar[ted] the penulto May 16 [0?] yeiris a [ged] ... ane yeiris chalmerlan to Bischope Robert Stewart erl ... IM vivit post funera virtus.
- 4 Elizabeth Turnbull 1816

SACRED  
to the Memory of  
ELIZABETH, Daughter of  
ROBERT and ELIZABETH TURNBULL  
who departed this life May 31st 1846  
AGED 19  
Affliction Sore  
Six weeks she bore  
The Doctor was in vain  
Till God did please  
By Death to ease  
And took away her pain

and of

ROBERT TURNBULL their only Son  
who departed this life Nov. 15th 1846

5 Eliza Campbell 1829

To the memory of  
ELIZA CAMPBELL  
Who died at Thurso 9th Feb 1829  
and of  
ISABELL CAMPBELL  
Her sister  
Who predeceased her 4th March 1827  
Both daughters of  
HUGH CAMPBELL OF LOCHEND

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am greatly indebted to Dr R G Cant and Dr Barbara Crawford for their patience in considering my views, and if I have not always followed their advice then the fault is mine. Miss Judith Scott drew my attention at a crucial moment to the relevance of the First Article of the Perth Assembly to my thoughts on the south aisle. Thanks are due to all those connected with the Museum, Town Hall and Public Library at Thurso who were always helpful. For the photograph of Thurso town I am indebted to Mr Falconer Water and for that of Old St Peter's Kirk to Mr James Campbell. Miss Caroline Hutchison with great patience unravelled my handwriting and typed the paper. My thanks must also go to Mrs George Watson who was always ready with a warm welcome, food and bed – necessities in the Caithness winter. This paper could not have been written without the help of George Watson; he took the photographs, helped with the survey, devilled away after references and – his words – ‘acted only as a wall for the ball to be bounced against’. In spite of any disclaimer on his part he is the co-author.

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