

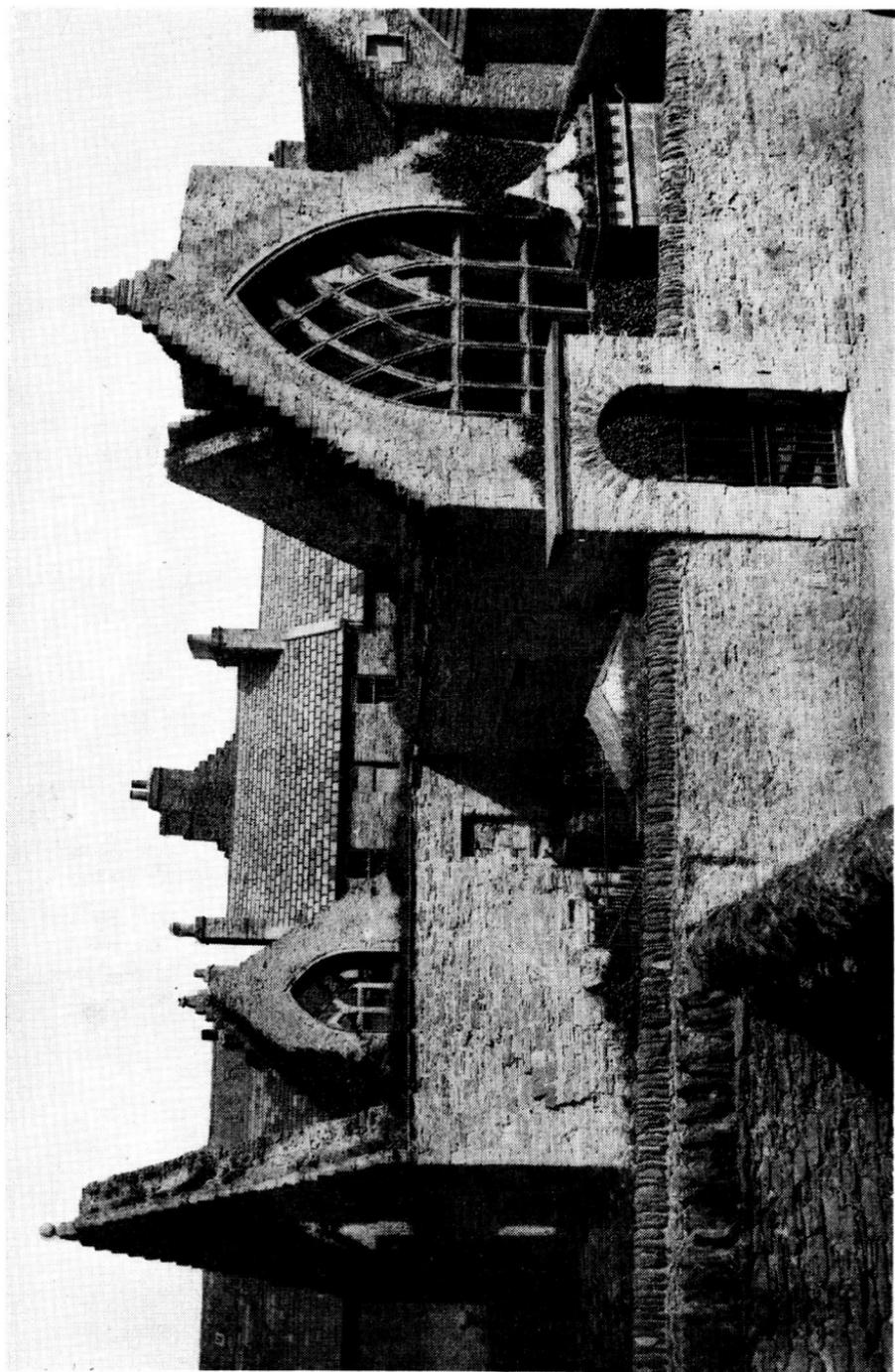
OLD ST. PETER'S CHURCH, THURSO

By John B. Gair, F.S.A. (Scot.), F.A.M.S., F.R.Z.S.

CAITHNESS—the north-east tip of the mainland of Great Britain—has many ancient constructions and monuments, ranging from galleried dwellings, long cairns, sepulchres of neolithic man, and brochs to the small, rudely-built chapels which are dotted over every parish. Natives of the county prefer to leave all these for visitors to ferret out, as, being of a superstitious nature, they believe that disaster will befall anyone interfering with such buildings or mounds! In some cases this may tend towards preservation but in other cases, I am sorry to say, the result is the opposite.

One of the best-known monuments is the ruin of St. Peter's Church at Thurso. It is situated near the harbour-mouth in the Fisherbiggins where the fishing community mostly reside. It was built in 1220 on the site of an ancient Celtic Church by Bishop Gilbert Murray, a noted and industrious Bishop of Caithness, who was renowned for his piety, learning and ability. He was so highly esteemed by King Alexander II of Scotland that the latter made him Treasurer of the North of Scotland. It is clear, however, that various alterations have been carried out on the building from time to time to meet various requirements, and a good deal of the present building now standing dates from the sixteenth century. Bishop Gilbert is also memorable for his firm resistance to the encroachments attempted by the Archbishop of York upon the liberties of the Scottish Church. He built the lovely Cathedral Church of Dornoch in Sutherlandshire which is still in use, and translated the Gospels and Psalms into Gaelic, the common dialect in the North of Scotland in those days.

Cruciform in plan, without aisles, the church measures externally 79 feet from East to West by 82 feet from North to South across the transepts. The unique tower is twelfth century, as is also the apsidal cell on the East side; the latter is regarded as having affinity with the lovely St. Margaret's Chapel at Edinburgh Castle. This cell is, however, no longer accessible. The masonry of the building throughout is all one class of local stone laid on thin courses. The beautiful South window is often a subject for painters and photographers. It is perhaps interesting to note that when the window was being built the local people brought along dozens of eggs in



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order that the cement might be mixed with the white of eggs. Today the mortar stands out impervious to the weather!

The porch at the re-entering of the nave of the South transept is a large one with stone seats giving access to the transept by a curious entrance not unlike the gateway to a well-defended mediaeval castle.

The building was in use until 1832 when the roof became dangerous and a new St. Peter's Parish Church was erected in the centre of the town. The old building was at various times with the permission of the Kirk Session used as a court house, and a vault connected with the building was made to serve as a lock-up or prison. It contained unique panelling and paintings. One of the latter represented the offering of Isaac, Abraham being dressed in a kilt and hose with flowing surtout; a pot with fire stood in one corner, whilst a ram bounded forward in another, and an angel with an irresistibly comical expression eyed the scene.

After the church fell into disuse a tramp took refuge in it one night and accidentally started a fire which gutted the building and left little but the walls standing. Today the fabric is in much need of attention and there are several voices crying in the wilderness of public apathy for its preservation, but with the "new" St. Peter's requiring £5,000 in repairs, it looks as if the building will not receive the attention it deserves. I shall shortly be making a determined effort to save the South window, as it is rapidly showing signs of disintegrating unless something is done. If any readers of this article would like to assist or encourage me perhaps they may care to communicate with me at "Bayview", Thurso. It would appear that the adjoining graveyard is a stumbling-block to its being taken over by the Ministry of Works. The old churchyard contains many old stones, the majority of which are made from the durable local flagstone. One stone is dated 1357; others bear the usual interesting inscriptions such as:—

"Here lies the grief of a fond mother
And the blasted expectations of an indulgent father".

and:—

"Affliction sore six weeks she bore
The doctor was in vain,
Till God did please by death to ease
And took away her pain".