



Travelexonline Rosslyn Chapel

Rosslyn Chapel, or the Collegiate Chapel of St Matthew as it was to have been, was founded in 1446 by Sir William St Clair, third and last St Clair Prince of Orkney. It is in fact only part of the choir of what was intended to be a larger cruciform building with a tower at its centre.

More than thirty-seven collegiate churches were built in Scotland between the reigns of James I and James IV (1406-1513). They were secular foundations intended to spread intellectual and spiritual knowledge, and the extravagance of their construction depended on the wealth of their founder.

After Sir William died in 1484, he was buried in the unfinished Chapel and the larger building he had planned was never completed. But the foundations of the nave are said to have been excavated in the nineteenth century and found to extend ninety-one feet beyond the Chapel's original west door, under the existing baptistry and churchyard.

What was built however is extraordinary enough, 'This building, I believe, may be pronounced unique, and I am confident it will be found curious, elaborate and singularly interesting, impossible to designate by any given or familiar term' wrote Britton on his *Architectural Antiquities of Britain* (1812), adding somewhat despairingly that its 'variety and eccentricity are not to be defined by any words of common acceptance.'

The principal authority on the history of the Chapel and the St Clair family is Father Richard Augustine Hay, Canon of St Genevieve in Paris and Prior of St Piermont. He examined historical records and charters of the St Clairs and completed a three volume study in 1700, parts of which were published in 1835 as a geneologie of the Sainteclaires of Rosslyn. His research was timely, since the original documents subsequently disappeared.

Of the founder Father Hay said this: 'Prince William, his age creeping on him, came to consider how he had spent his times past, and how he was to spend his remaining days. Therefore, to the end, that he might not seem altogether unthankful to God for the benefices he received from Him, it came into his mind to build a house for God's service, of most curious work, the which that it might be done with greater glory and splendor he caused artificers to be brought from other regions and foreign kingdoms and caused daily to be abundance of all kinds of workmen present as masons, carpenters, smiths, barrowmen and quarries... the foundation of this work he caused to be lain in the year of our Lord 1446, and to the end, the work might be more rare, first he caused draughts [plans] to be drawn upon Eastland boards [imported Baltic timber], and he made the carpenters carve them according to the draughts thereon and he gave them to for patterns to the masons, that they might cut the like in stone and because he thought the masons had not a convenient place to lodge in...he made them build the town of Rosin that is now extant and gave everyone a house and lands. He rewarded the masons according to their degree, as to the Master Mason, he gave nearly £40 yearly, and to everyone else £10...

Sir William's son and successor to the Barony of Rosslyn, Sir Oliver St Clair, roofed the choir with its stone vault but did no more to fulfill his father's original design.

The Chapel was generously endowed by the founder, with provision for a provost, six prebendaries and two choristers, and in 1523 by his grandson, also Sir William, with land for dwelling houses and gardens. On February 26th, 1571, however, just forty-eight years after his last endowment, there is a record of the provost and prebendaries resigning because of the endowments being taken by 'force and violence' into secular hands as the effects of the Reformation took hold. The Presbytery records of Dalkeith reveal that in 1589 William Knox, brother of John Knox and minister of Cockpen, was censured 'for baptizing the Laird of Rosling's bairne' in Rosslyn Chapel, which was described as a 'house and monument of idolatrie, and not ane place appointit for teiching the word and ministratioun of ye

The following year, the Presbytery forbade Mr. George Ramsay, minister of Lasswade, from burying the wife of a later Oliver St Clair in the Chapel. The St Clairs had not yet succumbed to the Reformation and remained Roman Catholics.

This Oliver St Clair was repeatedly warned to destroy the altars in the Chapel and in 1592 was summoned to appear before the General Assembly and threatened with excommunication if the altars remained standing after August 17th, 1592. On August 31st, the same George Ramsay reported that 'the altars of Roslene were haille demolishit'. From that time the Chapel ceased to be used as a house of prayer and soon fell into disrepair.

In 1650, during the Civil War, Cromwell's troops under General Monk attacked the castle and his horses were stabled in the Chapel.

On December 11th, 1688, shortly after the protestant William of Orange had landed in England and displaced the Catholic James II, a mob from Edinburgh and some of the villagers from Roslin entered and damaged the Chapel. Their object was to destroy the furniture and vestments, which were now regarded as Popish and idolatrous.

The Chapel remained abandoned until 1736, when St James St Clair glazed the windows for the first time, repaired the roof, and relaid the floor with flagstones. The boundary wall was also built at this time.

When Dorothy Wordsworth visited the Chapel on September 17th, 1807, she remarked: 'Went to view the inside of the Chapel of Roslyn, which is kept locked up, and so preserved from the injuries it might otherwise receive from idle boys, but as nothing is done to keep it together, it must, in the end, fall. The architecture within is exquisitely beautiful.'

Further repairs to the Chapel were undertaken at the beginning of the nineteenth century and in 1861 it was agreed by James Alexander, 3rd Earl of Rosslyn, that Sunday services should begin again. He instructed the Edinburgh architect David Bryce to carry out restoration work. The carvings in the Lady Chapel were attended to, stones were re-laid in the crypt and an altar established there. The Chapel was rededicated on Tuesday April 22nd, 1862, by the Bishop of Edinburgh and the Bishop of Brechin preached from the text, 'Our Lord, I have loved the habitation of thy house, and the place where thine honour dwelleth' (Psalms xxvi, v8).

The Reverend R. Cole, then resident military chaplain at Greenlaw Barracks near Penicuik, became private chaplain to the Earl. Lady Helen Wedderburn, daughter of the 7th Earl of Airlie, who lived nearby at Rosebank, organized a subscription from which some of the interior fittings were provided.

In 1880-1, Francis Robert, 4th Earl of Rosslyn, added the apse to serve as a baptistry with an organ loft above. The work is by Andrew Kerr. The Earl also filled the baptistry arch with the handsome oak tracery which you see today, decorated with his crest. Together with the two Chapel doors, this is the only wood used in the construction of the building.

The cost of the work was seven hundred and fifty eight pounds, eight shillings and six pennies, with a further thirty four pounds and eighteen shillings to Andrew Kerr for fees. Kerr told the Earl that a party of visitors 'had remarked that it was wonderful that such young men should be entrusted to execute such carving,' to which the estate factor 'very coolly replied, that it was not wonderful here, as the finest pillar in the Chapel was the work of an apprentice boy.'

The Earl was happy with the work and in a letter to Kerr on November 16th, wrote: 'I must say that the author pronounces your building a complete success.'

In 1915, a report on the fabric by Sir Robert Lorimer observed: 'The stone work of the Chapel is in fairly good order and requires very little done to it... a few of the stones are crumbling but not to the extent to cause any alarm. The condition of the roof is not satisfactory... and there are a number of gaps and cracks all over.' He recommended that the exterior of the roof be covered with asphalt and this was carried out.

In 1942 the Chapel was almost closed for a second time when a government official called Robertson wrote to the Minister of Labour, Ernest Bevin MP, 'that the Episcopalian Church at Roslin was almost empty every Sunday... on a recent Sunday there was a congregation of only two, and apart from the Clergyman's labour there must be other workers employed in cleaning and looking after the church and I suggest that steps are taken to close it down.'

A copy of the letter was sent to Gwilym Lloyd George MP, the Minister of Fuel, who in turn wrote to the Secretary of State for Scotland in the following terms; 'I enclose a copy of a letter from David Robertson which causes me considerable embarrassment, who am I, a Welshman, that I should do anything that might imperil the eternal salvation of one Scottish Episcopalian. In any case, from the fuel point of view, I doubt whether I would be justified in securing a small economy of fuel in this world at the possible cost of a disproportionate expenditure of it on myself in the next.' The Chapel remained open.

Further work was carried out by Anthony 6th Earl of Rosslyn, in the 1950's when the crypt roof was repaired and the interior carvings cleaned by hand over a period of several years. He also added the stained glass windows in the baptistry. A report of May 1954 from the Ancient Monuments Branch of the Ministry of Works records that 'surfaces covered with green algae will be scrubbed down with stiff bristle brushes... using a solution of .880 ammonia and water. Water will then be used copiously until the surfaces are clean and free from dirt and vegetation. Flaky patches will be sealed off... Hollow areas in ornament will receive special treatment by grouting... and when the surfaces are thoroughly dry they will be hardened with silica fluoride of magnesium at a rate of 1lb per two gallons of water.

This work was in accordance with the thinking of the time but not, unfortunately, with current conservation philosophy. The effect of the magnesium was to seal the internal surface of the masonry with an impermeable coating, so that the stone became saturated with water containing soluble pollutants. In addition, the coldness of the wet stone encouraged condensation. A report in 1995 confirmed that damage was occurring and that humidity in the Chapel was very high. It recommended that steps should be taken to dry out the saturated masonry, remove if possible the cementitious coating, and restore the permeability of the richly carved inner surfaces of the Chapel.

In March 1997, a free-standing steel structure was erected to cover the Chapel. It will enable the stone fabric of the roof vaults to dry outwards, away from the carved interior surfaces. In due course the bituminous felt, asphalt and concrete coverings of the stone roof vaults will be removed to assist this process. Stone and mortar repairs to the external walls, pinnacles, and buttresses, renewal of the rainwater disposal arrangements, repairs to the stained glass, and appropriate repair and conservation of the interior are all required. The coverings over the stone vaulted roofs will be renewed in lead

and ways of removing the cementitious slurry are being investigated, in order that this magnificent building can be preserved for future generations to use and admire.

We were honored to have The Prince of Wales as a visitor to Rosslyn on the 2nd of April 1998. The Prince was introduced to the Earl and Countess of Rosslyn, their two eldest children and members of staff along with those involved as Design Team members for the current phase.

The Prince toured the Chapel and took the opportunity for a unique view from the 21 foot high walkway. He then toured the new Visitor Centre and to mark his visit, unveiled a plaque and signed the visitors book. The Prince's visit follows a long tradition which has seen George V and Queen Mary visit in 1931 along with Prince Albert (later King George VI) and the Princess Elizabeth. The Queen and Prince Philip visited in 1961 and Princess Margaret in 1988. The Prince of Wales has a keen interest in Architecture and history and said that he has long held a desire to visit Rosslyn.

The year 2000 saw the Trust embark on a second phase of work. Funded jointly by The National Heritage Lottery Fund, The Eastern Scotland European Partnership, Historic Scotland and the Rosslyn Chapel Trust, this phase has a number of elements. Essential stabilization works to the east boundary walls will protect the Chapel. A new roof of Caithness slate has been placed over the existing Crypt roof, and the Priest's Cell and two more modern buildings beside the Crypt have been made functional. The stairs to the Crypt have been repaired and the access to the Crypt is now both safer and more of an experience. Work has also been carried out to improve the electrical services in the Chapel, repairs to the wooden screen at the west end, and our interpretation of Rosslyn's story. **This is a half day tour consisting of approximately four hours; the cost excluding any entry fees would be £180.00 up to a maximum of eight persons.**